



Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke

2

Ichibu Saki

Illustrated by Nemusuke

Character Designs by Ushio Shirotori



The illustration depicts a scene in a grand, sunlit garden. In the foreground, a young man with short blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark blue military-style uniform with gold braiding and a sword at his waist, holds a small pink rose in his hands. He is looking towards the viewer with a gentle smile. Next to him, a young woman with long, flowing red hair and purple eyes, wearing a blue and white dress with large ruffles and a blue bow in her hair, also holds a pink rose. In the background, a woman with long dark hair in a red dress and a man in a dark suit stand near a large, ornate fountain. A blue castle with multiple towers is visible in the distance under a bright blue sky with soft clouds and falling petals. A large, decorative white lace-like structure is in the upper left corner.

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Prologue

“Lady Charlotte, will you not be rising soon? Lady Claire will be returning from the Royal Aristocratic Academy today.”

At the maid’s words, Charlotte Martino scowled and rolled over in bed. The maid, taking the lack of reply as a sign that her mistress was still sound asleep, came up to the side of the bed and drew back the curtains with a whoosh.

Charlotte gasped as the darkened bedroom flooded with the morning light.

“Do wake up, Lady Charlotte,” the maid repeated. “I have hot water for you here.”

I’m still sleepy; go away! Charlotte imagined herself shouting, along with an annoyed click of the tongue. Instead, she slowly lurched upright and grumbled, “I thought I told you that I want tea in the morning, not plain hot water.”

“Y-You did, Lady Charlotte? My sincerest apologies.”

When Charlotte saw the maid’s startled expression through blurry, sleep-filled eyes, she realized that she’d slipped up. Even though she always took pains not to show her true colors, she knew full well that early morning was her weakness. *It’s all because Claire is coming home today!* she sulked.

Charlotte rushed to smooth things over with a smile. “Oh, no, that wasn’t what I meant! I was just thinking that Claire takes tea in the morning, not plain water, doesn’t she? It’s been so long since I’ve seen her that I must have gotten carried away and started copying her.”

“My, is that so, Lady Charlotte? You must love your sister very much.”

“Yes, of course I do! My sister means the world to me.”

The maid beamed at her, and Charlotte mirrored the gesture with an enormous smile of her own.

“Then I shall be off to prepare the tea,” the maid told her. “I’ve laid your outfit for the day just outside of the closet, my lady.”

“Thank you.”

Charlotte gave the maid another winning smile. The maid smiled back and then left the room, closing the door behind her with a thump. Once Charlotte was sure it was closed, she heaved a sigh.

“I should love her, but I don’t,” she admitted. “She’s nothing but an obstacle to me, after all.”

She looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror set in front of the closet and saw an annoyed girl glaring back at her. The girl had soft, fluffy hair and round, adorable eyes. Yes, she was definitely Charlotte.

Charlotte Martino was thirteen years old when a curious thought occurred to her. Back then, she had already found her perfectly ladylike half-sister, Claire, to be thoroughly unpleasant. She hadn’t always detested Claire, but Claire was only a year older and yet had known nothing but luxury since birth. It was all too *good* for Charlotte’s liking. Furthermore, Charlotte’s mother was, to put it delicately, not well-liked in high society, leading Charlotte to suffer many pointed glares during the tea parties and lessons she’d been made to join immediately after her adoption into the Martino family. Claire defended Charlotte each time the girl weathered such an attack. As a child, Charlotte venerated her sweet older sister like an angel, but as she grew older, she realized that she could never bridge the gap and become as ladylike as Claire, no matter how she tried. She had begun to nurse resentment for Claire.

Then, suddenly, she’d had a flash of insight that this whole world existed solely for her. A roster of eligible boys for her to pursue and a list of important events likewise appeared in her mind. To Charlotte, Crown Prince Asbert felt like a natural choice for her first target.

“Claire is returning home from her dormitory in the Royal Aristocratic Academy today because she is to be baptized on her upcoming fifteenth birthday. I can use this as an opportunity to flip our positions,” Charlotte told herself.

To Charlotte, the fact that she would be throwing Claire to the wolves to achieve her ends meant little. She smiled at herself in the mirror, and the adorable girl reflected there smiled right back, without a trace of malice

showing anywhere in her eyes.

This whole world existed just for her. Of that, Charlotte was sure. She didn't have the slightest bit of doubt.

Chapter 4

Claire awoke to the sound of someone knocking on her door. *Oh!* she thought, scrambling upright to look around. She was back in the suite of two connected rooms that she remembered residing in for two years. Claire's eyes shone as she drank in the sight of all the familiar furniture.

"This must be the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy," she said. She slipped from bed to check the view outside the window. Yet despite her excitement and able wits, Claire's legs refused to work, and she crashed to the floor.

Just then, she became aware of an odd sensation against her neck. *That's my hair*, she thought. It was as long as it once had been, before the night when she cut it and fled the Academy. "That means I really am back," she said. The calendar on top of her desk likewise confirmed that she had gone back in time by two years.

Just a few minutes ago, Claire had been in Minami's room loading the save file for Asbert's route. She wasn't sure how it worked, but apparently loading the file successfully allowed her to move back in time.

Having confirmed that the world around her matched up with her memory, Claire sighed deeply. *I believe I recall Riko saying that she saved at a branching path before my fifteenth birthday. Judging from the date, this must be the branch in question.*

"Also," she added out loud, "for some strange reason, my head doesn't feel very clear." Claire understood that both worlds were indeed real, but now that she was here, she felt as if everything that had happened before was some sort of dream.

Just as she shook her head to clear it, the knocking on the door resumed. "Lady Claire," said the person on the other side of the door. "Lady Claire?"

"Yes!" Claire cried, rushing to throw on a dressing gown and open the door. "Who is it?"

There stood her former friend, Caroline. “I do apologize for coming by so early in the morning, Lady Claire, but you will be returning home today, won’t you? I wanted to give you my best wishes before you leave, since I know we won’t be seeing one another for some time.”

“Oh, yes...” Claire said. This didn’t match her memories. Claire regarded Caroline’s cheerful grin with bewilderment. In her first life, after Asbert had announced the end of their engagement, and while Claire was making ready to flee the Academy, who had come to levy accusations against her but this very same girl? Claire and Caroline had been fast friends since the moment they started school together, but their relationship completely reversed course once Charlotte began attending a year later. Claire now understood that it was all Charlotte’s doing, but at the time, losing her friend had been terribly painful.

“Thank you for going out of your way to visit me, Lady Caroline,” Claire said.

“Oh no, not at all! I’ve actually been invited to the ball that’s to be held after your baptism. The Martinos are the only ones besides the royal family who are allowed to celebrate their baptisms in the royal palace, you know. I’m very much looking forward to it.”

“Yes, I look forward to seeing you there too.”

“I must be going now, Lady Claire,” said Caroline, “but do take care now.”

“I shall. Thank you.”

I remember now, Claire thought. This happened right when I went on holiday before my baptism.

With the farewells concluded, Caroline returned to her own room. Claire watched her leave with mixed feelings. Her old friend’s smile, the dormitory’s dignified atmosphere, even Claire’s own high-pitched voice that contained an excitement she’d just barely managed to curb—everything was exactly the same as in Claire’s memories of being fourteen and waiting for the date of her baptism to arrive.

She once again reflected on the determination that had brought her back to the past. *I am here now to ensure that Charlotte does not misuse her white magic, Claire thought. And then, a little over a year from now, I will depart this*

school for lias.

Another thought naturally followed on the heels of the first, and the corners of Claire's mouth curled up into a smile. *I wonder what Vik and the others are doing right now in Paffuto.*

Sunlight poured in through a gap in the curtains, telling her that it was now morning. And on that fine morning, Claire did not for one moment regret the choice she had made.

Forming an agreement with the spirits during baptism was a crucial moment in any young person's life. Proper formalities had to be observed before the fateful day itself even arrived. The more noble the family, the more lavish the ceremony, and as such, many first-year Academy students took a holiday from school in order to prepare for their baptisms. Claire, being the daughter of the celebrated Duke Martino, was no exception to the rule and took a several-week leave for her ceremony.

"I must say," she commented to herself, "I have rather missed this place." She felt a rush of sentimentality as she stood in front of the mansion she had been away from for so long.

After exchanging farewells with Caroline, Claire had taken a carriage to the Martino family estate but could not bring herself to open the door. *Charlotte should be home right now, she thought. But of course, this is a different Charlotte than the one who caused that catastrophe. I do hope I can keep my composure and act my usual self.*

The catastrophe had happened at the ball in Noston. Although Charlotte's arrogant behavior that day denoted a horrible blunder by the Martino family as a whole, it had been the girl's own temperament that led her to turn openly hostile, wound one of the members of Vik's party, and shatter the peace between the two kingdoms of Paffuto and Noston.

As the unvented anger made to rise in her once more, Claire bit her lip. *I'm a bit afraid*, she admitted to herself.

As she stood at the entrance attempting to rally her courage, the door suddenly opened.

“Lady Claire!” cried a maid with curly, pulled-back hair. “Welcome home!”

“Sophie,” Claire breathed. Her eyes grew wide at the sight of someone she hadn’t anticipated seeing again.

The maid—Sophie—smiled at Claire. The freckles covering her round face made her look all the more familiar and affectionate.

Memories of Sophie instantly flooded Claire’s brain. “That’s right,” she said. “You’re here because I’m still fourteen.”

Sophie looked puzzled at Claire’s odd slip of the tongue. “I beg your pardon, Lady Claire?”

“Oh, Sophie!” Being greeted by Sophie’s warm smile delighted Claire so much that she pulled Sophie into a hug without thinking.

“Oh, heavens!” Sophie said. “You’re still acting like a child, Lady Claire. Remember that you’re almost fifteen now.”

Sophie had been hired on to the Martino household shortly after Claire’s mother died, in order to serve as Claire’s personal maid. She had been like an older sister figure to Claire ever since, but she would announce her resignation no more than half a year from now.

“Lady Claire, Lord Leo and Lady Charlotte are waiting to see you. We have tea ready for you in the salon, but before that, do let me help you change into different attire,” Sophie said.

Claire smiled, relieved that Charlotte hadn’t come to greet her. She was sure that this was how she had reacted in her first life as well.

“I’ve missed them both ever so much,” she said. “I’ll go in and see them at once.”

As the salon door swung open, Charlotte leapt out and cried, “Welcome home, Claire!”

Claire instinctively flinched. In order not to betray how agitated she felt, she managed to adjust her stiff expression into something more appropriate. “I’m ever so glad to be home, Leo and Charlotte. It pleases me to see that you’ve

both kept well.”

“We have! I’ve been looking forward to you coming home for your baptism for ages and ages now. Tell me all about your school! Oh, and tell me about Asbert!”

As Charlotte looked at Claire with her adorable, round eyes, Claire admitted to herself that Charlotte was undeniably charming. All of her previous unease about being able to treat Charlotte normally evaporated instantly.

I don’t remember feeling any hostility from her until she received her white magic, Claire thought. Perhaps she really does miss me, the same way I felt when I hugged Sophie.

“Charlotte, don’t go startling Claire,” Leo reprimanded. “But you two really are close. No one would ever guess you don’t have the same mother.”

“We don’t have the same mother either, but we’re close too. Aren’t we, Leo?” Charlotte asked. “Unless maybe you don’t feel the same way about me?”

Charlotte’s reaction was rather unnecessary for Leo’s trivial comment, but when she tilted her head to one side and her huge eyes clouded with sadness, she did indeed look adorable.

“Of course I do! How could I not?” Leo spluttered.

“Thank goodness! I love you too, Leo!”

As Claire watched her siblings tease one another, Riko’s voice echoed faintly in her mind. *It’s super hard to raise your popularity with the brother... An alarm bell went off in Claire’s head. Come to think of it, she thought, I wonder if Charlotte has found the letter from my mother in the strongbox yet.*

The letter should have been locked up in a strongbox in the Martino family study; its purpose was to inform Claire that she needed to have her baptism on Lindel Island. However, according to Riko, Claire’s older brother Leo had thrown it out in Claire’s first life, thus allowing Charlotte to go down Asbert’s route. Doing so had effectively kicked Claire out of her position on center stage.

I do want to leave the kingdom, Claire thought, and I don’t care one way or the other about retaining my status as Asbert’s fiancée, nor my honor as the

eldest daughter of the Martino family. Yet with that being said, I would still like to read my mother's first and last letter to me.

A pang of longing for her mother mixed with faint anticipation about the letter's contents. It wasn't so much that Claire didn't wish to protect the letter, but more that she wanted to avoid anyone discovering her true magical power, so that she could still meet Vik and his friends in a year as she'd planned. *But I am very interested in seeing what my mother might have left for me to read on the verge of turning fifteen*, Claire thought.

She stared at her two siblings blankly, thinking about her mother instead, until Charlotte's voice instantly snapped her back to reality. "Is something wrong, Claire? Come and sit down, and tell me all your stories about the Academy!"

"There's no need to rush," said Leo. "You'll be going there yourself next year, won't you, Charlotte? But come on, Claire. Come sit down."

"Thank you, Leo. I will," Claire responded.

Charlotte and Leo were, indeed, friendlier with one another than could be expected for half-siblings. Claire, knowing the future as she did, felt it was almost as if they shared some sort of common goal.

On a brief tea break, Claire went to visit her father's study on the mansion's second floor for the sole objective of retrieving the letter from its lockbox. In the interim, Charlotte and Leo once again entertained themselves with conversation in the first floor salon. Leo's tales of his time at the Royal Aristocratic Academy were engaging enough that neither were likely to follow Claire up the stairs for some time. *Father and Oscar will be returning home from the palace come nightfall*, Claire thought. *That leaves me only a bit of time.*

She carefully opened the door and crept over the threshold. The left and right walls of the study were lined with built-in bookshelves extending all the way to the ceiling. Each shelf was packed with all sorts of books. Opposite the door stood an enormous window, an imposing writing desk, and several places to sit.

When I was small, Claire thought, *I often came here to watch father work*. A smile grew on her face as she recalled those fond memories. However, her

heart soon sank again when she remembered her father's conduct towards her on the night of that fateful ball. He had spoken to her as if she'd been nothing more than an object, but it hadn't bothered her since she had expected such treatment from him. Still, it would have been a lie if she'd said she did not miss the kind man Benjamin once was.

"Father is always so busy," Claire said to herself. Stacks of documents covered his spotless desk. Nothing had changed from those childhood days in which she had sworn to someday live up to her name as the eldest daughter of the Martino family.

She peeked under the desk and found the small strongbox. *There it is!* she thought. The Martino family kept all of its true valuables in a room protected by a magical seal, but this strongbox opened with no more than the combination for its dial lock. Claire's grandmother, once the eldest daughter of the Martino family herself, had brought the box into the household. She had fallen ill and passed away several years previously, but prior to that, she had always given much attention to all of the Martino children, particularly Claire.

Seals made with magic can likewise be broken with magic, Claire thought. *My grandmother taught me that, in order to prevent this from occurring, it's best to rely on more mundane methods and promises made from person to person.*

She spun the dial on the lock as that wisdom echoed in her mind. According to her grandmother's instruction, Claire's parents, Leo, Oscar, and Claire herself knew the combination and were bound by a magical oath to never divulge it. That meant that when Charlotte came along later, the box would not open for her no matter what she might try.

If I remember correctly, Claire thought, *this should be the combination.* The numbers she entered matched the retro lock's specifications, and it unlocked. The lid made a dull creaking sound as she opened it. The strongbox was empty save for a photo album, several cards, and a pink envelope.

"This is it!" Claire cried as she took out the envelope. *Should I open it here?* she wondered. *Yes, I'm sure it'll be fine if I reseal it and put it back after reading it.*

She hesitated for a few seconds before she could bear it no longer. Claire

broke the seal and removed a sheet of paper containing words written in a hand which she faintly recalled as belonging to her mother.

To Claire,

A very happy fifteenth birthday.

I have written this here, for I cannot forget to tell you. You must be baptized on the island of Lindel in Paffuto.

There was nothing else beyond that simple message.

I'm sure mother didn't expect to lose her life so soon after she wrote this, Claire thought. *This must have been her last resort in case of the worst happening.*

There were no letters addressed to Leo or Oscar within the envelope. And indeed, both boys had been baptized in Noston. "I must have been the only one she feared could cause great harm to the kingdom if I were to be baptized here," Claire said.

Her voice sounded hoarse even to her own ears. The letter's simple contents had filled her with regret over losing her mother so suddenly all those years ago. With trembling hands, Claire hugged the letter to her chest and closed her eyes.

In her first life, Claire had learned of the secret of her mother's lineage only after she had left the Royal Aristocratic Academy and met Vik and friends. This gave her the knowledge to understand why she was the only recipient of a letter.

My mother bore the burden of knowledge that she was the last survivor of the Lindel royal family, Claire thought. *She knew that once this became known, she would be in terrible danger. That was why she took such pains to delay anyone from finding this letter.* Had Claire read it in her first life, she might have felt a mixture of guilt and sympathy towards her brothers, and perhaps even a twinge of anger towards her mother for hiding it.

"Leo reads this and then throws it away, doesn't he?" she asked herself. The

particulars of that situation remained a mystery to her, but it was clear enough that if she put the envelope back, he would throw away her mother's last words to her. *But I'd rather hold onto it*, she thought. Her grip tightened on the pink envelope in her hands.

Just then, she heard the voices of Charlotte and Leo talking on the stairs. They must have left the salon.

"There is no problem with being baptized at a church in Noston at this age," Claire rationalized. "It won't change the future."

With her mind made up, she took the envelope in one hand and closed the strongbox with the other before pushing it back far under the desk. Upon returning to her room, she shut the letter away inside the trunk in her closet where it would stay as a memory for her and her alone.

A few days later, Claire and Oscar stopped at a café while on an excursion into town.

Claire bowed deeply and said, "Oscar, thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to bring me here today."

Oscar looked back at her, puzzled. "Why are you being so formal?" he asked. "I don't normally get a chance to see you when you stay in the Academy dorms, but I wanted to spend time with my dear little sister."

Claire herself was just as bewildered. The Oscar fresh in her memory would have nothing for her save cold stares, but before that, Oscar had been a wonderfully kind, dependable figure in her life. Their sibling relationship only grew cold once Claire became the disgrace of the Martinos and she could no longer show her face before her eldest brother. Perhaps that change had been only natural, for Oscar was at one time poised to serve her in the future, and Claire had suddenly lost her standing.

My baptism is what causes my relationship with Oscar to change, Claire thought. *I only have a little more time in which he'll speak to me this kindly.*

It pained Claire to consider that he, who had once left her, would soon leave her again in much the same way. Still, there was nothing she could do to change

the future until she at least met up with Vik and the others.

“But more importantly, I’m glad,” Oscar continued. “The dresses you bought this time are much simpler than the ones you normally wear. They do say that one’s taste changes before one’s baptism, I suppose. You must be growing up, Claire.”

“Oh, yes,” she said. Her brother’s soft tone of voice moved her to sentimentality, even nostalgia. “I’ve been rethinking my position in life before my fifteenth birthday arrives.”

That gave Oscar pause. “Are you now? Well, I suppose that’s a good thing.”

“I’m glad to hear you speak so highly of me,” Claire said. When Oscar smiled approvingly at her, Claire could not help but smile right back. In this sense, Claire felt that even the changes that would occur in the near future were a mistake.

Incidentally, the pair was wrapping up a trip into town that involved procuring Claire’s gown for the ball after her baptism. Normally, the tailor would have brought it to the mansion directly, but Claire’s wardrobe had presented an urgent issue. Namely, her every gown and dress was in the childish, cutesy style she had preferred as a fourteen-year-old. Young Claire had not been satisfied with taking frills to the next level, preferring instead to try one or two more levels after that for good measure. Ribbons covered every available surface on each of the garments. However, Claire was now mentally over sixteen years old, and no matter how much her maid, Sophie, insisted that she looked adorable in them, wearing such outfits was an affront to Claire’s sensibilities.

It would have taken considerable time to remove all the ribbons and frills from her current clothes and alter them accordingly. Therefore, Claire had requested that Oscar take her into town to find several premade dresses to wear in the interim. Once they picked up the commissioned dress Claire was to wear at the ball, their shopping was complete, and the two had decided to stop at this café for a break.

Just as Claire brought her fruit tea to her lips, she overheard someone’s conversation. “Say, did you mention that your next trip will be to Lindel Island?”

Lindel Island? she thought. Claire almost turned unintentionally to look at the

speaker before she caught herself.

“Uh-huh,” said a new voice. “They say it’s beautiful there. Have you been?”

“Not yet. Maybe I should go on my next holiday.”

The speakers were a pair of men sitting at a table directly behind Claire. She knew it was rude to eavesdrop, but the mention of Lindel Island had piqued her interest.

Lindel Island was where the kingdom of Lindel, the place where Claire’s mother was born, had once stood. During her first life, Claire had visited there with Vik and his companions and had been baptized quite by accident. Now in her second life, she fully intended to leave the Royal Aristocratic Academy in a year’s time, go to Iias, and then make her way to Lindel Island to be baptized once more.

It really is such a lovely island, she thought, and one that’s full of precious memories.

“Forget your next holiday,” the second man said. “You’d better go as soon as you can make the time!”

“Why’s that?” The first man wanted to know.

“I hear that soon they’re going to fill in that pretty beach folks call a fountain of holy water. When I heard it’d be my last chance to see it, I took a trip out there as soon as I could.”

Claire turned rigid at this unexpected bit of news. *What in the world?* she thought.

“Really now?” said the first man. “What a shame.”

“It really is. Anyway, it’s time. Shall we get going?”

Shaken, Claire could not move as the two men left the café.

The beach they call a spring of holy water is being filled in? she thought.

“What’s wrong, Claire?” Oscar asked.

“Oh, it’s...” She hesitated. “Oscar, have you ever visited Lindel Island in the kingdom of Paffuto?”

“No, I haven’t. But I do have plans to visit that area of Paffuto next month to take part in a ceremony. I was thinking I would like to stop by there if I get the chance.”

Oscar appeared not to have overheard the conversation, as he answered her with a level of casualness that Claire did not think was warranted.

“I hear Lindel Island is such a gorgeous place for its natural beauty and historical buildings,” Claire said. “I imagine they’ll be developing it soon for sightseeing opportunities, won’t they?”

Oscar immediately caught on to where Claire was taking the conversation and nodded. “Oh, yes,” he said. “I’ve heard about that. There have been disputes in Paffuto over the issue. Some aristocrats are in favor of destroying the island’s sole beach.”

“How terrible!” she cried. *Why is this happening?* she wondered. *I heard nothing about this in my first life. It’s shocking enough as it is that they plan to destroy that relaxing holy spring, but more importantly, this means I won’t be able to be baptized after I run away from the Academy.* To Claire, not being baptized was not the issue in and of itself, but her concern lay with the magical tornado that would form just over a year from now. *On the day when I was suddenly called into the palace, it looked as if even Paffuto’s most powerful magicians were unable to purify the tornado. Which means...* If Claire did not receive her full magical powers, there would be enormous damage all across the land.

“But they’ll need the crown’s permission to start any sort of large-scale construction works,” Oscar said. “Much less removing the island’s one beach that they call a holy spring. No matter how much power these aristocrats command, it won’t be easy for them to succeed.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s right...”

But that’s no guarantee that the beach will still be standing in a year’s time, Claire added to herself. *If the holy spring is destroyed without my knowledge, then that spells the end for me.*

“It’s important for anyone who would someday marry into the royal family to be interested in the affairs of other kingdoms besides Noston,” Oscar said. “I

must say, you've really grown in the small time since I last saw you, Claire."

Claire was silent.

"Claire? Are you feeling all right? Should I order you something cold to drink?"

"No, thank you; I'm fine," she said. "But I appreciate your concern."

Worried about Claire's sudden gloomy mood, Oscar offered to order her another fruit tea or a dessert. Claire smiled in an absentminded sort of way the whole time, but on the inside, she resolved herself to act.

The day of Claire's fifteenth birthday arrived not long afterwards. *This is the second grand baptism of my life*, she thought. She removed her shoes to avoid getting them wet in the holy water and surveyed the scene around her with a thoughtful air. The baptism spring was located on the church grounds, and it would be the second time Claire had stepped foot in it.

In addition to Claire's family, the chattering crowd around her included her fiancé, Asbert, and his royal father, the king. There was no doubt in any of the guests' minds that today Claire would be recognized as the eldest daughter of the Martino family with all the magical talent to match; in fact, she herself had felt the same way during her first life. *But now I know how this all ends*, she thought. *And this time, I want it to end that way.*

Claire knew all the chatter around her would immediately die out the moment she stepped foot in the water, but that didn't give her any pause. She dipped her foot in the spring with a sound like a ringing bell. Then a dim light spread out from the surface of the water.

"Heavens!" an attendant cried. "The water is..." There the words died in the attendant's throat. It made sense, Claire rationalized. After all, the water indicated that her magical color was to be light pink. The churchyard, once filled with lively enthusiasm, quickly became so silent that one could hear a pin drop. Then, silently and awkwardly, one person after another shuffled away. Claire looked at her father, whose back was slumped in disappointment, and the king standing a slight distance away from him.

As everything proceeded around her, she noticed Asbert sneaking her a

covert glance and caught his eye, but she didn't particularly care either way. Claire looked down at the water again and said, relief evident in her voice, "Why, it's lovely. So this is the color I've earned, isn't it?"

Even though Claire had not received the magical color everyone expected her to, the ball had already been fully prepared and could not simply be canceled. Claire, dressed in the gown she and Oscar had picked up the other day in town, idled in one corner of the ballroom, utterly bored. In her first life, this ball had been a terrible tribulation for her, and when she had tried to approach anyone, all they did was give her a fake little smile before scurrying away. Worse yet, most of these people had scrambled for opportunities to talk to her just days before. She supposed that some of them simply weren't aware whether they were allowed to speak with her, but even then, their dismissals had been much too blatant. Claire remembered hiding her wounded feelings and somehow soldiering on, holding her head high to the end.

As she had predicted, this event was turning out in the exact same fashion as it had before. The only difference was that now Claire had the ability to smirk inside at all of the goings-on; although, of course, she never showed any of this outwardly.

It'd be kindest to everyone else if I simply weren't here, as I keep making them uncomfortable, she thought. *But I suppose that wouldn't be allowed.* Incidentally, Caroline, who had come to the ball on the pretext of seeing her, refused to go anywhere near Claire.

A live orchestra, attempting to dispel some of the gloomy atmosphere, played loudly, its music echoing through the ballroom.

Claire seemed on track to spend the evening alone, but then Asbert approached her and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Oh, Your Highness," she said. "Thank you for being worried about me." *Is he really talking to me at a time like this?* Claire added to herself. *Classic Asbert. I was right about him after all.* Claire had often been concerned with his inability to read the room in tense social situations. Any other nobleman would never have approached Claire after she had failed to live up to the expectations of her

station. However, even though this breach of etiquette was as severe as if Asbert had walked in wearing muddy boots, Claire did not find that she minded it in the slightest. In fact, she even felt pleased by it.

This must have happened in my first life too, she thought. Only I must have been in too much shock to notice.

“This must be a terrible blow to the Martino family,” Asbert said.

“Oh, not at all,” said Claire. “We still have Charlotte. This is no cause to worry.”

At Claire’s words, Charlotte—who had come up to Asbert’s side at some point during the conversation—took a step forward.

“Do please cheer up, Claire,” she said.

“I am fine, Charlotte. Though my magic may be weak, I can still be useful to someone in other ways.”

“Oh, Claire...” Charlotte’s eyes filled with tears, and Claire passed her a handkerchief. Charlotte accepted it with a watery giggle. The action was not exactly becoming for a young lady, but it was otherwise so charming that Claire found herself smiling too.

When does Charlotte begin to change? Claire wondered. In her memories, everyone had begun to treat Claire differently not long after Charlotte’s enrollment in the Royal Aristocratic Academy. Her once-close friend, Caroline, distanced herself from Claire, and before long, Charlotte had wormed her way into Asbert’s group of friends and retainers as well. Soon afterwards, Claire found herself fully isolated. *Charlotte’s white magic might have been the deciding factor,* Claire realized.

Just as that thought began to cheer her up, she looked at Charlotte and suddenly noticed the color of the embroidery on the bust of Charlotte’s gown. It was the same pleasant lime green as Asbert’s pocket handkerchief. It was no rare thing for ball attendees to match color accents with the person escorting them, but Asbert was not escorting Charlotte tonight. If anything, from a certain point of view, this was a clear breach of etiquette.

But I thought Charlotte preferred cuter colors like pink, Claire thought, *so this*

could hardly be a coincidence.

Asbert caught Claire looking at him strangely and said uncomfortably, “I noticed as well, and I tried to change it. However, your lord father, His Grace the Duke Martino said—”

“Oh, yes!” Charlotte cried. “I noticed earlier that the embroidery on my dress is the same color as Prince Asbert’s pocket handkerchief. But father said that it was all right.”

“Did he, now?” said Claire. “I see.”

No one moved to reproach Charlotte for drowning out Asbert, despite his much higher rank. It appeared that, unbeknownst to Claire, the proceedings to switch her and Charlotte as his fiancée were already underway. *Not only that, she mused, but I don’t recall these two being as close this early on.*

As Claire reexperienced this particular life event, she tilted her head in confusion and then took a sip from her wine. In Noston, drinking was allowed as soon as one turned fifteen. She was on her guard in case it tasted bad, but, to her surprise, it went down smoothly. *I suppose this means I can drink, she thought.*

“I’m surprised that you seem so calm,” Asbert said.

“How so, Your Highness?” asked Claire.

Asbert paused. “Well, I assumed you would be more devastated, I suppose.”

She burst into sudden laughter over his choice of words before the visibly puzzled Asbert and Charlotte, the latter still clutching Claire’s handkerchief. In her first life, Claire had always felt tense around Asbert out of a desire to be perfectly proper when standing at his side. Yet it was far different now.

“Claire?” Charlotte asked, tentatively.

“My apologies,” Claire replied. As she looked at the two of them side by side, the words naturally slipped out. “It is nothing. I was only thinking that you do match Prince Asbert very well, Charlotte.”

“What do you mean, Claire?” Asbert asked.

I slipped up, Claire thought.

Asbert looked horribly flustered. He must have thought that Claire was upset because of the color of his pocket handkerchief. Claire could never once have imagined such a reaction from the man in her memories who was always so cold and emotionless.

“My apologies, Your Highness,” she said. “I simply couldn’t help but say that when I saw how perfect of a pair you make when standing next to one another.”

“A perfect pair?” he repeated. Asbert looked more uncomfortable by the moment, and Claire frantically tried to explain herself. At that exact moment, the orchestral music filling the grand ballroom went silent. Claire knew full well that everyone around her was straining their ears to hear what she would say next.

“Yes,” she said, and then paused briefly. “I am quite happy that the next pride and joy of the Martino family is developing a stronger relationship with the royal family.”

“The next pride and joy, you say?”

“Oh, Claire, that’s not true!” Charlotte cried.

Asbert and Charlotte both looked at Claire, his eyes reflecting bewildered embarrassment and hers sparkling for some unknown reason.

Incidentally, Claire was not good at holding her alcohol. She had once slipped up and revealed the secret of her own lineage while drunk during a meal with Paffish friends.

What should I do? she wondered. *I can’t justify myself at all. That first glass of wine must have started going to my head.*

She caught her father’s eye from across the ballroom as he looked upon her with pity.

“Did you call for me, father?”

After the ball was finished, Claire had returned home to the Martino mansion quite late in the evening and found a summons from her father waiting for her.

“There you are, Claire,” he said. “Take a seat.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Like Claire, Benjamin had been up early preparing for the baptism and then likewise attended the ball until late at night. Claire was aware that if he simply wanted to talk, it could have waited until tomorrow, so there must have been some reason he had requested to speak with her in the dead of night. She felt uneasy.

More than anything, she thought, I know this didn't happen in my first life. Wary over what they were about to discuss, she sat down on the couch that he had indicated.

Her father sat across from her behind a glass of liquor and a decanter. The scent of alcohol pervaded the gloomy study, creating an ominous atmosphere.

This can't be anything good, Claire told herself. In her first life, she had spent this entire night alone. There had been none of the usual grand reception from the servants when she returned from the palace. When she asked later, she learned that Charlotte and Benjamin had made it home before her and instructed them as such. The only one who had come to meet her was her personal maid, Sophie. Once she'd had a bath and a good rest, she understood that it was only done out of concern for her, but it served as an unpleasant preview of her life from that point forward.

Caught up in memories as she was, Claire immediately realized what was happening, and yet she did not expect the next words out of Benjamin's mouth.

“Claire, what do you think of going abroad to study at the Royal Academy in Paffuto?” he suggested.

Claire was supposed to be adept at feigning calm, but her voice came out shrill. “Going abroad, father?”

Paffuto was Noston's larger neighbor, and although the topic had come up in conversations with her friends, fourteen-year-old Claire had never considered going there herself, much less to study abroad.

I expected him to be disappointed with me for not living up to his expectations at my baptism, Claire thought. *So why is this happening? What went different*

from my first life?

“It is a good thing to be able to see the outside world,” her father told her. “And to study in such a grand kingdom for several years... See now, Claire, there will be quite a lot of action happening soon.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about, father,” Claire said.

“Oh, you know what I mean,” he insisted. He looked straight into her eyes as he gave this vague response.

Claire hesitated momentarily before saying, “I suppose there must be some problem with me staying here in Noston.”

“No, nonsense, not at all! Yet... Well, you said so yourself at the ball earlier, didn’t you? Charlotte and His Royal Highness make a perfect pair.”

Now understanding what her father was trying to say, Claire sighed internally in frustration at her blunder. *Oh, that, she thought. Father must have heard me approve of their relationship. Now that it’s convenient, he’s making to switch me out and have Charlotte be Asbert’s fiancée. In such a situation, it would hardly be decent for me to be present.*

However, she could not readily assent if she wanted to preserve a certain future. She needed to prevent Charlotte’s personality from becoming as rotten as it had, in addition to stopping her from brainwashing everyone around them with magic. *And to that end, she added to herself, I cannot leave Noston. Besides the matter of Charlotte, that would also utterly change my relationship with Vik and the others.*

“Yes, I did say as much to His Highness,” Claire admitted. “But I only put it forward as a suggestion to consider the relationship between our two families. If we were to switch fiancées so readily, would it not cause a scandal, father? One might think the Martino family were being greedy.”

Benjamin’s voice immediately turned pained. “And would you have me bear watching my daughter be lambasted by the inquisitive eyes of society?” He covered his own eyes and bowed his head to face his lap.

Claire bit her lip. *So this is what father is thinking about?* she reflected as an image of her father from her first life came to mind.

After her first baptism, her father had stubbornly refused to let Claire leave the house. Prior to that, the family had made frequent outings, but going on such trips abruptly came to an end, and Claire was only allowed to stay at her lodgings in the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy. Even when Claire was expressly invited to any event, she was aware that her father would send back the invitation, declining in her stead. *I truly had fallen from grace, she thought, but then I stayed in that state of disgrace. I never once told father what I myself wanted.*

“I am terribly sorry that I was not able to live up to your expectations and receive a color of magic that befits a member of the Martino family,” she said.

Claire’s father’s face contorted into a frown. “Claire,” he began.

“However,” Claire continued, “my duty now is to assist Charlotte. Fortunately, I have received the appropriate education for it ever since I was a young child.”

At least at this point in time, Claire thought, father is still thinking of what is best for me. He said he did not want me to be exposed to curious stares. However, after Charlotte’s baptism, I know he will have me chaperone her in public. By that point in time, she must be brainwashing him.

Claire wanted to convey to him her lack of desire to leave Noston, but his next words told her all she needed to know.

“I think it would be best to keep you two distant from one another.”

“Distance myself from Charlotte, you say? Whatever do you mean by that, father?”

“We’ve all spoiled Charlotte rotten; however, from now on she will become Prince Asbert’s fiancée. Having an accomplished elder sister at her side would be painful for her in many ways.”

“I understand your concern, father, and yet...” Claire trailed off as she realized that she couldn’t properly express her opinion. *My plan in coming back to my baptism was to reform Charlotte. But what is the point of that if I cannot be anywhere near her?*

Yet at the same time, she understood what her father meant. She stared down at the floor in defeat.

“Claire, I understand well how you feel,” Benjamin said. “However, we have Prince Asbert’s feelings to consider as well. Therefore I do wish, as the head of this family, for you to go study abroad.”

Orders from the family head were absolute, and Claire supposed that Benjamin might very well have already informed the king of his plan. She had known from the moment her father broached the conversation so seriously that she would have no right to refuse him in this matter.

“Very well, father,” she relented after a pause. “May I know when I am to leave for Paffuto?”

“In one week’s time. It is sudden, yes, but the king is to visit Paffuto at that time in order to attend a ceremony. Oscar will be accompanying him, and you would likewise be welcome to go.”

“In a week?!” Claire cried.

I don’t have enough time, she thought. But who can I leave with Charlotte that would provide suitable support for her?

Her head spun with ideas even as she accepted her father’s proposal. At the same time, she tried to pretend she didn’t notice the hope growing deep inside her. If she went to the Royal Academy now, perhaps she could meet Vik earlier than she had planned.

But he won’t know me, she thought. It won’t be like before. What chance would I have to meet him as a transfer student from a foreign kingdom? The answer was cruelly apparent. As much as she longed to see Vik, another part of her was afraid of their reunion.

I need to tackle one thing at a time, she told herself. For now, she decided to put a lid on her feelings.

The next day, Claire set off for Asbert’s office in the royal palace with her father’s words from last night sowing doubts and indecision in her mind. *Charlotte asked me why I enjoyed tormenting her so much at the ball where she hurt Lui, Claire thought. It’s true that when I was a child, I believed it was for the best to teach her various things, but...now I wonder if perhaps I am to blame for*

her having gone astray.

Now that she thought about it, the reason why Charlotte had gone on a rampage at the ball in the first place was because Claire had whispered advice to her. *I wonder if I couldn't have done a better job of it somehow*, she thought.

As Claire walked across the marble floor, her hand moved out of habit to brush the place where she had once kept the pocket watch. Yet she felt no hard lump of metal in the soft fabric of her skirt.

Claire's mouth tightened as she stood before the door of the office she had not visited for quite some time now. She gave it a few knocks and called, "Excuse me."

Presently, the door opened, and there stood Asbert's retainer Salomon.

"Oh, is that Claire?" Asbert called from behind him. "You must have wanted to speak with me. Do please wait for me in the adjoining parlor, won't you? Salomon, please bring the good lady some tea while she waits."

Claire interrupted Asbert in the midst of giving further orders and said, "No, thank you. I am perfectly fine waiting for you here."

Asbert looked taken aback at Claire's attitude. As Claire watched twin wounded and puzzled expressions fight for control of Asbert's face, she slightly regretted her choice of words. *Come to think of it, at this time in my life, I am still on good terms with him as his fiancée. It's not as if he's a particularly bad person either*, she reminded herself.

Ruefully, she followed Asbert's orders without further resistance, retreated to the parlor next door, and sat down on the couch. She had come to see Asbert today for the sole business of discussing Charlotte's future. Typically, Asbert could be found in his rooms in the Royal Aristocratic Academy; however, on school holidays, he returned to the palace to fulfill his duties as a member of the royal family.

He's letting me take up his valuable time, so I must be brief, Claire told herself. Not long after Salomon brought Claire her tea, Asbert paused at a convenient point in his work and came over to sit opposite her.

Once he sat down, Claire immediately broached the conversation. "As you

may have heard from His Majesty the King, I have come here today to request that we break off our engagement.”

“Hold on,” said Asbert. “I did indeed hear that this morning, but I do not consent to this. The older sister is not good enough for me, so I should marry the younger sister? How terribly improper. You mustn’t pay this any mind, Claire.”

“No, Your Highness. It is apparent that I do not serve any use to our fair kingdom of Noston. I am sure that Charlotte will be able to meet your expectations.” She paused briefly before continuing. “Furthermore, Your Highness, you must be aware that neither of us are allowed to have any personal inclinations informing the matter.”

“That I understand, and yet...” Asbert trailed off.

Claire had not at all expected Asbert to display such reluctance breaking off their engagement. She knew that the matter could be settled cleanly in one year’s time, but she did not have that long to wait.

“My father tells me that the decision has already been made,” she said. “I am upset as well, but there is nothing we can do.” She gave him a forlorn frown, trying to appeal to his emotions.

Asbert said, “I see,” before falling silent.

“Also,” Claire continued, “father is worried about my social standing and is therefore making arrangements for me to study abroad in Paffuto.”

“What?” Asbert cried. “Why, that’s nothing more than a polite way to be rid of a nuisance!”

Up until now, Asbert’s face had worn an expression of sympathy for Claire, but now it looked filled with rage.

“Yes,” agreed Claire. “That is exactly what it is. However, we needn’t bother ourselves with that; there is a matter of much greater concern.”

“How can you accept this so simply? And what is it that you are concerned about?”

“The person who is to educate Charlotte. Naturally, prior to this the Martino

family has never seen fit to give Charlotte lessons on how to be the queen consort. One can assume that after I leave for Paffuto, my father will see to it to secure a teacher for my dear little sister.”

This, Claire realized after looking back on her first life, was an obvious fact. She had come to see Asbert today for a single reason: to ensure that he would arrange for Charlotte to have a proper teacher to prevent her from straying down the wrong path. *I feel terrible for burdening another with this responsibility*, she thought, *but perhaps it's best for Charlotte and I to be apart to begin with.*

Asbert hesitated before asking, “Are you telling me that your family has been remiss enough to let her grow up to do whatever she pleases, and now you’d like to entrust her to the royal family?”

“That is certainly one way of putting it.” Claire grinned. “Yes, she may be a little selfish and free-spirited, but she really is a good girl at heart. I’ve tried to give her advice in bits and pieces, but the future queen really ought not to be admonished by her lowly older sister, now should she? Charlotte’s personality is such that she’d do best with a bright, cheerful teacher who compliments her often.”

“Could you tell me the name of someone you think would be fitting for her?”

“I believe the holy woman Lady Anne would be quite competent.”

“I see.”

Asbert signaled with his eyes, and Salomon, waiting on hand for his master, nodded.

“Lady Anne is the aunt of both myself and Charlotte,” Claire explained. “In addition to having received an education as befits a proper lady, she possesses white magic which she presently employs in service to our kingdom. I am sure that she’d be a wonderful person Charlotte could turn to for advice. However, the request mustn’t come from my family, for my lord father is already too sweet on her, so he will need the support of the royal family as well in order to ask this of my aunt.”

“I see.”

Claire hesitated. "As Your Highness must no doubt be aware, Charlotte is very fond of you. While the start of her education may present her with many challenging tribulations, I have no doubt that she will prevail with Your Highness's encouragement."

Asbert looked at Claire with a rather surprised expression. "But Claire, is that all right with you?"

"Whether it is or not, I do indeed think that you and Charlotte are well suited for one another. I love Charlotte, and if you feel pity for me now, I ask that you use it to watch over my sister. I fear she will be lonely, so please write to her, and if time allows, do please take a moment to share tea with her."

Asbert hesitated before saying, "I will."

She caught his eye and smiled. She could still see confusion and discomfort in Asbert's eyes, but she knew his character well and was sure that it would not take him long to warm up to the switch.

Haltingly, Asbert said, "I see now that I have misunderstood who you fundamentally are. My impression of you was always nothing more than a typical beautiful, perfect young noblewoman possessing all the qualities to make a suitable queen consort. If I may speak frankly, I felt slightly relieved at yesterday's baptism when I realized we could not possibly continue this engagement any further. I am deeply ashamed of myself for thinking that way."

"If I may be just as frank, I feel as if a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders as well. It pains me that I cannot serve Noston and Your Highness, but I think that from now on I should like to pursue a life for myself."

"I wish you the best of luck in that."

Asbert extended his hand to her, and Claire blinked in surprise. "Thank you," she said. "I wish you great happiness as well, Your Highness." She clasped his hand lightly and smiled back at him. Her cheeks felt rather warm, but perhaps that was only due to the hot sunlight streaming into the room.

He must also bear the responsibility of a kingdom, she thought. I pray that he takes it in a good direction. And so wishing, she took her leave of the palace.

That evening, Claire paid a visit to Charlotte's room. "Charlotte," she called. "I'd like to speak with you for a moment. Would you mind?"

"What is it, Claire?"

Charlotte beckoned Claire inside, and Claire took a seat on the sofa before fixing her gaze on her sister. Charlotte was barely over fourteen and appeared so much younger than the girl in Claire's memories of that night at the ball.

"Charlotte," Claire said, "it has been decided that I will be going abroad to study in Paffuto."

"What?" Charlotte cried loudly. "You're going abroad? Really?"

"Yes," said Claire. "The king and father decided such after witnessing my baptism yesterday."

"Oh, no! Whatever does this mean? I don't have the faintest idea."

"I believe they are telling me that I'd best find a place for myself somewhere outside of the kingdom."

"But you have to be there for me when I start school at the Royal Aristocratic Academy. I've been so looking forward to attending school with you. This can't be happening!" Charlotte looked crestfallen.

"This means that from now on, Charlotte, you will be the one for His Highness."

"Huh?" she cried. "Me?"

"It pains me that I cannot be near you to support you through this process, but even if there is nothing wrong, know that you can always come talk to me. Would it bother you much if I wrote to you daily?"

"You'd never bother me! Oh, Claire. I'll write you letters too. I'm going to be ever so lonely without you."

Charlotte rushed over and hugged Claire tightly. Claire stroked her hair. Oh, her sweet little sister. Claire had always been there to protect her ever since they were both young. She felt like it had been so long since she'd touched Charlotte's soft hair like this.

Even now I can't believe this is the same girl who schemed up all those plots, Claire thought. *But if she has her beloved Asbert with her, perhaps that will be enough to change the future even if I am far away.*

Claire and Charlotte talked long into the night about Asbert and life at the Academy. Charlotte even asked questions about some of Claire's male classmates whom Charlotte should have had no way of knowing about. Claire found it odd that Charlotte knew these young noblemen so well, but looking back on how close Asbert and Charlotte had been at yesterday's ball, she concluded it wasn't such a mystery after all. *She and Asbert must have their own personal conversations,* she thought.

Claire hadn't had such a pleasant time with her sister in years, but when it was over, she returned to her own room. Charlotte had still looked upset when wishing Claire a good night, but Claire chalked that up to jitters about suddenly being made the prince's fiancée. She gave her sister another big hug before leaving for the night.

Chapter 5

One week later, Claire set off with Oscar and the rest of the delegation to Paffuto. In her first life, she had ended up in Paffuto as a runaway, but this time she was arriving in a more official capacity as a student from abroad. Her maid from the Martino mansion, Sophie, had been allowed to accompany her to the mansion near the Royal Academy where she would stay. *I know the area around the school and the castle town rather well*, Claire thought. *Now I am starting to feel excited about this!*

The party stopped at various inns along the way as their journey led them to Lindel Island, the halfway point on the route to Paffuto's capital city of Wurtz. As it so happened, tonight's lodging was to be on the island itself. Once there, they were to meet with a welcome party sent from Paffuto, leaving those already assembled with plenty of downtime in their schedules.

I'd like to take care of my baptism and get it squared away without anyone noticing, Claire thought. *Oscar presumed that there would still be time before the beach is filled in, but that is no reason to delay. I don't have any idea when it might happen.*

"This island is truly as beautiful as everyone says," Oscar said.

His words startled Claire out of her plan-making reverie, and she hurried to look up. "I couldn't agree more, Oscar."

The sky was a clear blue with pleasantly warm spring sunshine. The old cobblestones had a real sense of history to them, and the multitude of flowers in bloom all over the island looked no different than they had in her first life. The spellbound Noston delegation could not tear their eyes away from the island's sheer beauty.

"Aren't you tired, Claire?" Oscar asked.

"I am fine, thank you," she said.

Oscar was supposed to have grown distant from Claire after her baptism; yet

oddly, Claire saw no signs of that in his behavior now. He was as kind as he'd once been, and Claire could not hide her genuine bewilderment.

What with this and the matter of me going abroad, she thought, something is different. Although I suppose he may only be putting on a good act while we travel with the delegation.

Meanwhile, Claire was also trying to determine the best time to be baptized. The holy spring was located behind the castle proper, and while Claire had considered sneaking out under the cover of darkness, she realized that the aurora-like glow showing up in the night sky would immediately give her away. If possible, she would need to go to the beach during the daytime by herself.

"I've heard that the island is reserved for our exclusive use today," Oscar told her. "You used to be fond of flowers, weren't you, Claire? This area is lovely, of course, but I've heard that there's an even prettier view behind the castle. We still have time before our Paffish escort arrives, so why don't you take a walk over there and see it for yourself?"

Claire gasped. *Saying that I've gone off to see the flowers might be the perfect excuse*, she reasoned.

"Thank you, Oscar," she said. "I'd love that."

"My apologies, but I must currently stay put." Oscar turned to one of the knights guarding the party and called, "Excuse me, can we have an escort?"

Claire frantically rushed to stop him. "I'll be fine on my own," she promised. "Aren't we the only ones on the island today? There shouldn't be any danger."

Oscar thought for a moment and then relented with a, "Well, I suppose."

Relieved, Claire set off for the spring.

The beach brought back many good memories. No one else was around, and in the resulting hush, the salt scent of the ocean mixed with the sweet scent of the flowers blooming nearby. Baby blue eyes, geraniums, anemones—with these aromas floating in on the cool wind and the warm sunlight shining down, the beach made for a lovely, comfortable spot.

In my first life, Vik and the boys were playing in the water, weren't they? I fear it's too cold for that now. Claire giggled to herself as she remembered that scene from one year ago. She removed her shoes, stripped to her bare feet, and found that the ground underfoot was indeed as cold as she had expected. As she walked down to the water, the dry, silky feel of the sand clinging to her toes brought back both more memories and a smile to her face.

It's so beautiful, Claire thought. Before her, the surface of the water glittered with the reflection of the sun as the waves approached and retreated. The fact that all this beauty was hers alone to enjoy helped make it feel extra special to her, as if a holy atmosphere enveloped the beach.

As she at last drew up to the water's edge, a large wave rushed to meet her and drenched her up to the ankles. The sensation carried with it a feeling of nostalgia. The moment the wave touched Claire's feet, the already bright day grew even brighter, and thousands of light rays poured down from the sky. As it was the middle of the day, she could not be sure of the light's color, but each particle's hue looked fantastical.

In my first life, she recalled, I thought the aurora had appeared, but now that I see it again, it looks as if the particles of light themselves consist of many colors.

In a single instant, the rain of light came to rest on Claire. *I feel as if I'm ever so slightly heavier now,* she thought. However, she didn't appear to be transformed in any way that she could see.

She had lost consciousness last time, but this time Claire retained control of her body with no trouble at all. "Is my baptism truly over?" she wondered. Curious, she made her magic twine about her body and cast a ward on herself. The momentary sensation of the magic rising within her was exactly the same as it had always been. Yes, she told herself. *It's the same as before. My baptism must have been successful.*

She breathed a sigh of relief that she was able to be baptized before the spring was filled in. Then she heard a familiar voice.

"It is prohibited for anyone but those serving the Paffish royal family to be on this island today. Do you have permission to be here?"

Claire gasped. The owner of the voice had not stepped out onto the beach

and, she assumed, was calling to her from the roadside just a bit away. Yet Claire could not have mistaken his voice for anyone else's. She quelled her rising excitement and, turning away from the beach, lifted her eyes to the road.

There stood four very familiar figures. Sunlight glistened in the transparent hair of the young man who had spoken. He was still too far away for Claire to see the color of his eyes, but she knew for certain who he was.

"Why are you here?" she murmured but then could not continue further.

The four advanced on Claire while she remained rooted to the spot, so shocked she had even forgotten she was still barefoot.

"Why, isn't she from the Nostonian delegation, Vik?" Lui suggested. It had been too long since Claire had heard that voice addressing her prince. Claire recalled how deathly pale Lui had been the last time she had seen her.

The four descended to the beach and stopped just before Claire. "Me-ow! She's a cutie. Hey, girl, what's your name?" Denis called, all friendly smiles. By way of comparison, Lui and Keith stood behind him with a hint of unease peeking through their usual moderate expressions. And then, standing in the midst of the group, there was Vik.

Compared to the way she remembered him, Claire thought he looked slightly shorter, and his face still had some of the youth of boyhood about it. However, she saw none of his tender kindness directed at her in his jade green eyes.

I can't believe it, Claire thought. I never expected to meet him here. Furthermore, while she had expected him to treat her warily as a total stranger, the actual fact of it hurt worse than she'd imagined.

She rubbed her eyes and then pinched the hem of her dress to make a curtsy.



“My name is Claire Martino of the Martino family of Noston,” she said. “I am here today as a member of the delegation from Noston. My sincerest apologies for the intrusion.”

“Oh?” said Keith. “May I present to you His Royal Highness, Prince Vik of Paffuto.”

Claire smiled lightly. “Yes, I am aware. It is my true pleasure to meet Your Highness here today.”

“Is it now?” Vik asked.

This slightly sarcastic response made Claire blink. *Perhaps I said something odd*, she thought.

“Say,” Vik began, “would you happen to be the Martino girl from Noston who’s coming to study at the Royal Academy of Paffuto?”

“Yes, Your Highness. It was ever such a sudden decision, but it appears that Your Highness has already been informed.”

Vik’s expression looked calm, but Claire did not detect a hint of that familiar warmth in his voice. Yet she had no time to be shocked by that, for his next comment was far too surprising.

“Indeed, I have been. There was an urgent request from the Noston royal family that my family receive an honored guest. As we speak, a portion of the palace is being prepared to be used as your lodgings.”

What? Claire thought. *I’m to be treated as an honored guest?*

Vik noticed Claire’s expression of absolute shock and scratched his head in disbelief. “What? You didn’t know?” It was not meant unkindly.

This must be Prince Asbert’s doing! Claire thought. “I do apologize that you’ve gone to all this trouble on behalf of one so lowly as I,” she said.

As she bowed, the expression on Asbert’s face during her last visit with him in his office flashed through her mind. She had noticed a faint tint to his cheeks and a receptiveness that was perhaps more sympathetic than was strictly necessary. Those must not have been a product of her imagination after all. *Prince Asbert is going to such lengths for me, his ex-fiancée*, she thought. *I never*

expected this of him, but I suppose it isn't out of character. Still, though!

“Oh, but my lord father informed me that I was to have a mansion with a butler and guards near the royal palace,” Claire continued. “It would be far too kind of you to offer lodgings for me in the palace itself. Please, do not trouble yourself so on my behalf.”

Vik had been studying Claire intently all the while, and now his expression wavered slightly. “...Barefoot, huh?”

“She’s barefoot, all right,” said Denis.

“That she is,” agreed Keith.

Lui didn’t say anything but only smiled. Claire followed their gazes and realized they were staring at her feet.

Oh! she thought. As Claire had only just finished being baptized, she was still barefoot. To make matters worse, there was a bit of seaweed wrapped around her sandy ankles. It was as clear as day that she had just walked into the ocean.

“I do apologize for my appearance,” she said after a pause. “I was just...possessed by the desire to do a bit of wading, I suppose. I promise that I would normally never do such a thing.” It sounded like an excuse. She couldn’t believe she’d shown up to their long-awaited reunion looking like this. Horribly ashamed, her face grew hot.

Denis noticed Claire turning bright red in embarrassment, grabbed Keith’s hand, and pulled him into a run. “Good weather today, don’t you think?” he cried. “We should take a dip too!”

“Whoa!” Keith yelled. “What are you doing, Denis?”

Even though Keith had a larger build, Denis somehow managed to drag him into the water in mere moments. Denis frolicked in the shallows and splashed water on Keith, who took it gamely. It was a twin to the scene Claire had seen once before.

As Claire watched the two horse around, she felt a very familiar someone come up next to her. Her lips tightened.

“Not only were you sent abroad at the drop of a hat, but they didn’t even

have all your affairs in order, hmm?" Vik said.

"It appears there was a slight miscommunication. I do apologize for all the trouble, Your Highness."

Vik paused for a moment before saying, "I see. I must say, I had the suspicion that there were some extraordinary circumstances afoot when I heard that a young lady coming from abroad to study should receive our utmost hospitality."

Claire giggled. "Yes," she said. "I'm full of extraordinary circumstances, none of them good."

Come to think of it, she remembered having had a similar conversation when she met Vik in Iias in her first life. The fond memory prompted a laugh to naturally slip out.

The repetitive murmur of the waves mixed with the sounds of Denis whooping in glee and Keith grumbling in exasperation. Claire savored the smell of the sea and felt the moist sand at her feet as she watched light reflect off the water's surface in time with the movement of the waves.

I never expected us to meet this early, Claire thought. However, I know that we definitely won't have the same relationship as in my first life. Presently, Vik mentally categorized Claire as an honored guest, not a friend. This was the path Claire had chosen for herself, but it was an unbearably lonely one.

Lui, perhaps noticing Claire's somber mood, smiled at her from the other side of Vik. "A church once stood on this beach in the kingdom of Old Lindel."

"Really now?"

"Oh, yes. Old Lindel was a kingdom surrounded by water, and its goddess was that of the ocean. The waters of this coastline were called a holy spring, capable of soothing the weariness in people's hearts. The kingdom was lost during the course of its tragic history, but this beautiful place at least remains unchanged throughout the ages."

She must have noticed that I seem upset for some reason and is trying to cheer me up, Claire thought.

She was on the verge of relaxing, comforted by the fact that Lui was as kind as

Claire remembered her to be, but just then, Vik said, "That's right. There's no way it could ever be filled in or anything of the sort."

Claire opened her eyes wide as Vik mentioned the very thing she had wanted to know in more detail for so long.

"Excuse me," she said. "Are the stories that people wish to fill in this beach true?"

"Yes. So even people in Noston know now, huh? A nobleman in my kingdom has proposed that this beach should be filled in and turned into cliffs for defensive purposes. Nothing would have pleased me more than to refuse that absurd suggestion outright." He hesitated before going on. "However, as this nobleman has a considerable degree of power, there has been a slight controversy."

"Who is this nobleman, may I ask?"

"The Earl of Mead."

Claire gasped. *The Meads!* The boy who had incorrectly cast the Collective Magic curse on her was none other than Dion Mead, a member of this very same house.

The future is different than what I know, she thought, and the Meads are connected with it. Is this really a coincidence?

"Why would they want to destroy a spring of holy water?" she whispered, dismayed.

Vik did not answer. Claire knew full well that this was not a topic to be discussed with a mere student from abroad.

Noticing the awkward situation, Lui smoothly changed the topic. "Your ward is very beautiful, Miss Claire. It's quite well done."

"Thank you for saying so."

"You are clearly comfortable with the process, so you must have an excellent teacher."

In fact, Claire hadn't learned wards from any school teacher so much as from Lui herself. Lui had drilled Claire constantly in her first life to combat the

Collective Magic Dion possessed.

Claire hesitated a moment before saying, "Yes. I am very fond of my teacher."

Lui said nothing, merely looking into Claire's eyes and smiling.

"Judging from how old you look," Vik said, "you must have been recently baptized, Miss Claire."

Claire started in alarm. Her true baptism had only just finished, but naturally, that was something best not discussed here. "Yes," she said instead. "Although, if you're referring to my ward, my teacher taught me them most strictly, so that I could protect myself."

"Really now?" said Vik. "It must be discouraging to be so far from your teacher. But we have plenty of very talented mages at the Paffuto Royal Academy, so you may consult with them whenever you have a need."

"Thank you for the suggestion."

She managed to smile, but Vik's words had made it all too clear that he viewed her as nothing more than an ordinary classmate. Her heart ached.

Just then, Denis and Keith waded back to shore, sopping wet. "Shouldn't we be heading back soon?" asked Keith. "I'd like to go change my clothes."

"Swap clothes with me, Lui," Denis suggested.

"Not happening."

Claire giggled at Denis and Lui's antics, relieved that their friendship was the same as ever. "I suppose Sir Knight is so desperate he won't even mind wearing a lady's clothing."

All of the Paffish company apart from Lui stiffened. "Miss Claire, you are the first to have recognized that Lui is a lady knight within moments of meeting her," Vik said.

"Uh-huh," said Denis. "She and I have been friends since we were kids, but I thought she was a boy for the longest time. I'll never forget how shocked I was at that one tea party we had before her debut in high society when she actually showed up wearing a dress."

Lui was pointedly silent for a moment, ignoring the boys, before taking Claire's hand and offering, "Shall we head back, Miss Claire? The way is rough, so do please watch your step."

Claire smiled radiantly and said, "Thank you," as Lui led her away.

Vik hung back, giving the girls a slight berth, as he watched Lui guide Claire up the beach. "Keith," he remarked. "This young lady from the Noston duke's family is not quite what I expected."

"I have to agree with you there," Keith said. "I was positive she'd be a spoiled young rich girl demanding preferential treatment. But she seems quite nice."

Vik did not respond to that but only quickened his footsteps.

Three days later, Claire arrived in the Paffish capital, Wurtz. There was to be a welcome luncheon and meeting held later on at the palace, but this had nothing to do with an ordinary schoolgirl like Claire. As she made to climb down from the coach, she worried over what would happen to her now.

I tried asking Oscar about the mansion where I am to stay in Wurtz, Claire thought, *but he completely gave me the slip.* Claire had learned on the beach in Lindel the other day of Asbert's too-generous favor to her. What in the world was he thinking, demanding that she be treated like an honored guest by the royal family? She was grateful that he still showed such consideration for his ex-fiancée, but no ordinary schoolgirl could possibly live in the palace.

Sighing, she stepped out of the coach and was greeted by the sight of the palace which matched the one in her memories in every way. *I'm ever so happy to have made it back here again,* she thought, *but all the same...*

Far off in the distance ahead of her, she could see the King of Paffuto waiting to greet the delegation. Standing at his side was, naturally, Vik. Once again, Claire noticed how much younger he looked than the Vik in her memories, but he still performed his duties looking every inch the dignified crown prince. In her first life, it had been allowed as a matter of course for her to stand up there with him and talk to him. However, she did not have such luxuries this time.

No matter how challenging this may be, Claire reminded herself, *this is the path that I have chosen.* She did not hang her head downwards in defeat but instead looked straight at him.

Suddenly, her eyes came to rest on another young man. *Who is that gentleman?* she wondered. In her first life, during the time when she lived in the palace as Vik's fiancée, Claire had learned of practically everyone of importance in Paffuto. As she had received lessons all throughout childhood on how to be the queen consort of Noston, grasping the similar sort of things in Paffuto, such as the noble families' personal relationships and power struggles, came naturally to her.

However, she did not recognize the man standing on the opposite side of the king from Vik. Unlike the two of them, his blond hair had a reddish tinge to it which caught her attention. He looked to be about four or five years older than Vik, and judging from his clothing and the medals decorating his person, Claire could tell that he was some person of considerable rank. *Yet I shouldn't fail to recognize anyone high enough in rank to stand next to the king,* Claire thought, confused.

Then, when Vik turned to the man and addressed him as, "My dear brother," Claire turned rigid. *That's his brother?* she thought. Vik shouldn't have had a brother.

As if connected to her confusion, the welcoming, convivial mood of the chatter subsided unnaturally. Everyone still smiled as they conversed with one another, but they seemed tense, as if waiting to see what would play out next.

"My dear brother," Vik continued, "thank you for undertaking my duties in my absence."

"Think nothing of it, Your Highness," the man said. "I am glad to see your safe return."

While their voices sounded affectionate, the words themselves were rather detached and formal.

Vik shouldn't have an older brother, Claire reminded herself. *What is going on?*

Someone called Claire's name. She turned and saw that her own brother had, at some point, left the front and come down to find her.

"Hello, Oscar," she said.

"The man conversing with His Highness Prince Vik right now is His Highness Prince Oswald, the second heir to the throne. I hear there are all sorts of complicated circumstances regarding this, so I advise you to tread lightly."

"Very well. I shall."

She had all sorts of questions, but now wasn't the right time for that. This point, if nothing else, should have been the same as in her first life. Claire held her tongue.

"I will be attending the luncheon and meeting with His Majesty the King. Claire, you can go on ahead to your rooms."

"Rooms?" Claire questioned. She had a bad feeling about this.

Several servants popped up from behind Oscar. "This is where you will be living now, Miss Claire Martino. We have prepared quarters for you in the detached palace. Do let us show you the way."

Claire gasped and reflexively looked up at Oscar.

"This is the final gift from His Highness Prince Asbert," Oscar explained. "Do accept it; there's a good girl."

Oh, this can't be, she thought. Contrary to her wishes, she had ended up with a room in the palace after all.

"Good morning, Miss Claire," said Sophie. "I've brought you some tea to help you wake."

"Thank you, Sophie. Did you have any trouble with it?"

"Not a bit! Miss, you've received a set of truly lovely rooms. If I may be so bold, I do suggest that you convey your thanks to His Highness Prince Asbert."

Claire hesitated. "Yes, I suppose I should."

It was the next morning, and seeing Sophie come in as naturally as if she was

in Claire's own bedroom in the Martino mansion put a smile on Claire's face.

Claire had been assigned to one of the rooms in the detached palace on the castle grounds. Yet "one" may have been a bit of a misnomer, as Claire's quarters were remarkably different from the ones she'd received in her first life. To begin with, the main door opened onto a spacious lobby with lofty ceilings, followed by a main room with an attached side area which was designated for guards, maids, and the like. The room even boasted an additional simple food preparation area. For Claire, who had brought no one else but Sophie with her to Paffuto, the room was extraordinarily decadent.

I suppose this is what it means to be treated as an honored guest of the royal family, Claire thought. As she looked back on it, the sheer excessiveness of the deal made her sigh. She had been sent out of the kingdom to allow Asbert and Charlotte to build a good relationship with one another, but this was the treatment they'd sought for her. Nothing about the situation was consistent, and it gave her a headache.

Incidentally, according to a piece of news Sophie had mentioned to her yesterday, the detached palace Claire lived in housed accomplished magicians and specialists with great talents or knowledge needed by the crown. As a result, the place observed strict security; but that it was far removed from the inner castle, allowing Claire to be at ease, was her sole comfort.

"What will you be taking today, Miss?" Sophie asked.

"I can make my breakfast myself, so I will be fine, thank you."

As Sophie stepped away, Claire opened the magnificent bed curtains covered in fine embroidery. Spread out in front of her was the beautiful scene of the palace's rear garden. Unlike the other carefully planned gardens, this one was nothing so flashy, yet even so its trees were beginning to bud in the fresh green foliage of spring. *What gentle morning air,* Claire thought. *Now I'm truly starting to feel like I'm back.*

She opened the window and took a slow, deep breath. Perhaps she had deviated from her original plan in several ways, but for the time being, she felt as if there was nothing she could do but go along with it.

After finishing breakfast, Claire was in the middle of studying when Sophie popped up again and said, “Today is what is known as the Decennial Ceremony. Will you be attending to watch, Miss?”

The king of Noston and Claire’s brother Oscar had, among others, been invited to Paffuto to commemorate the founding of the kingdom and celebrate it reaching a historic milestone. Naturally, as Claire had not received an invitation herself, she could not participate in the ceremony; however, she could still watch as a regular guest.

If I were to say that I wanted to go out and walk around on a day such as this, I’m sure I would have a guard escort me, as I am an honored guest, she thought. It’d be best to stay put so as not to make them go to all that trouble.

“No, thank you,” she said. “I would feel guilty for causing trouble by mixing with all these crowds.”

“Are you sure? But someone has come to show you around. Are you sure you’d like to decline the offer?”

“Someone is here to show me around?” Claire tilted her head in confusion.

“Yes, Miss. Sir Lui Clark, Miss—a retainer of the crown prince, I’m told.”

Claire bolted up, and at the same moment, she glimpsed someone with flowing black hair standing behind Sophie.

“Hello, Miss Claire,” said Lui. “I would love to show you around the castle in the time before the ceremony starts, if you would be so amenable. Do you have a moment to spare?”

“I-I’ll be ready at once!” she cried, excited by the unexpected invitation.

“The closest way to enter the central part of the palace from this detached palace is through the rear garden,” Lui informed her as they set off for the place where the ceremony was to be held.

“Thank you for telling me. That is most helpful,” Claire said.

The castle was enormous, and as a result, not everything, such as the rear garden, was well maintained. Weeds sprouted in the little footpaths of loose

pebbles that ran here and there about the garden. As Claire walked along, the scent of the grass and the sunlight filtering through the leaves overhead made her feel a kind of nostalgia.

But why am I being shown around on the day of the Decennial Ceremony? she thought. *I'm sure Lui must be busy today.*

Lui noticed Claire looking at her and chuckled. "You've come all this way to Paffuto. Since you are studying abroad, shouldn't you experience everything you can?"

"That is true. Thank you for your kind consideration."

This must have been another part of the hospitality towards Claire, the so-called honored guest. Remembering the consideration Lui had also shown her on the beach in Lindel, Claire bowed her head.

Today was a milestone for the kingdom of Paffuto, known as the Decennial Ceremony. There was a lavish ceremony scheduled for this afternoon, featuring many honored guests from foreign lands even beyond Noston, followed by a celebratory parade that wound through the streets of the capital city. The magnificent day would culminate in all of the royal family assembling on the palace balcony.

There was still time before the ceremony, and yet the palace had already been totally transformed from its normal state. As Claire and Lui reached the heart of the palace, many people passed them by, coming and going in each direction. Claire could hear the sound of musicians rehearsing.

"Excuse me, Lui—I mean, Sir Lui—are you sure you can really afford to show me around right now? You must have many other duties."

"Escorting you was incorporated into my schedule from the start, so please do not worry yourself over me," Lui answered smoothly, her face as calm as ever.

That fact that even a detail so small as this had been pre-considered thrilled Claire.

Claire and Lui arrived in the main plaza, and Claire thought *Oh!* when she saw Vik, presumably there to oversee today's events. Denis and Keith were with him, scrutinizing some sort of paper. There was also one other man with them.

“Prince Oswald,” Claire murmured.

Lui looked at her in surprise. “You are well informed, my lady. I did not believe that Prince Oswald was well known in foreign kingdoms.”

“My older brother told me about him. Since I will be living under your hospitality, I plan on learning everything I can about Paffuto.”

“Then surely you must have wondered why Prince Vik is the crown prince even if he is the younger of the two.”

Claire hesitated, feeling as if Lui had perceived her confusion yesterday, and then admitted, “Yes, that’s correct.”

“As in Noston, the right of succession in Paffuto favors the children of the queen consort. However, if a king’s concubine bears a child first, this child will become the crown prince.”

“Then how does that explain Prince Vik?”

Lui lowered her voice. “Prince Oswald is a bit of a peculiar case. Allegedly, His Majesty the King had no children apart from Prince Vik. Yet several years ago, he decided as a protective measure, should anything happen to Prince Vik, to adopt the child of a former concubine from a retainer. That would be Prince Oswald. Prince Vik was already widely recognized as the crown prince, so Prince Oswald became second in line for the throne despite being four years older.”

“My,” said Claire, startled. “I had no idea such things happened.” It was the first time she had heard this bit of news, and in her surprise, she said no more than that.

Just then, someone asked her, “How are you liking Paffuto so far?”

Claire looked in the direction of the voice and realized that Prince Vik was standing right there when she could have sworn he was off talking to someone else a bit of a distance away. She hurriedly composed herself and greeted him with a curtsy.

“Your Highness, I must wish you a happy Decennial Celebration on such a splendid day as today.”

“You haven’t found anything to be an inconvenience?”

“Not at all, Your Highness. I am quite pleased with everything you’ve done for me. Thank you for all of your kindness.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

Claire nodded happily, pleased all the more that Vik seemed so concerned about her. However, neither his tone of voice nor the expression he directed at her were those he would use with a friend.

His hair glowed in the morning sunlight, and she felt like she might drown in his emerald green irises. Claire could not look away, but she was no longer well enough acquainted with him to be allowed eye contact. *Lonely as it may be, this is the path I chose*, she thought, reminding herself of her pride for yet another time.

In the silence that followed, Oswald stepped up next to Vik. “Greetings,” he said. “I am the second in line for the throne, Prince Oswald Atkin Paffstant. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

He must have been watching her conversation with Vik, Claire realized. She dipped another respectful curtsy.

“I am a student from Noston to study abroad, Claire Martino.”

“You are the same age as our crown prince, are you not? That would make you classmates.”

“Yes, and I am truly fortunate for this to be the case.”

As opposed to Vik’s platinum blond hair, Oswald’s blond hair had strong red highlights in it. His eyes were also a lighter blue tinted with gray. From outward appearances alone, the two looked far from being brothers, but the dignified smile he directed at Claire was a twin to Vik’s own.

He is Vik’s older brother and yet is second for the throne, Claire thought. Clearly, this was a sibling relationship more complicated than that of the Martino household.

She remembered how yesterday, after the delegation from Noston had arrived at the palace, there had been a noticeably tense atmosphere while the two brothers had exchanged even those few simple words.

But something about that is off, she thought. She felt uncomfortable. While it was unavoidable that Vik and Oswald should have a stiff, formal relationship, Oswald sometimes looked at Vik in a way that was quite gentle and kind.

“Today is a special occasion,” Oswald said. “Do please enjoy yourself.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

I understand well the position he occupies, she thought to herself. *But why wasn't he in the future?* Vik had never mentioned an older brother to her before. If anything, he'd never shown her so much as a hint of any unusual family background.

“You are an important guest in our kingdom,” Vik said. “If anything troubles you, do not hesitate to come to us.”

“Thank you. I am most grateful.”

Vik gave her a dignified smile to match her formal reply and then gallantly moved away.

Still feeling pangs of loneliness, Claire decided to broach her questions to Lui. “Excuse me, L—Sir Lui.”

“Yes, what can I help you with?”

“Does Prince Oswald happen to have a fiancée in another kingdom, by any chance?”

“That he does not. To begin with, our kingdom's customs prevent him from taking a fiancée before the crown prince does.”

Claire hesitated before saying, “I see.”

She had briefly considered the possibility of Oswald marrying a bride from another kingdom and leaving Paffuto to be with her, but this idea was immediately shot down.

Concluding that it'd be impossible to delve any deeper into the matter, Claire changed the subject. “I've quite enjoyed seeing the palace in this way before the ceremony. I've learned where most everything is, so you don't need to show me around any further. Thank you for your time.”

Lui smiled meaningfully at Claire's words. "The Prince of Noston requested that we treat you with courtesy. While I understand that you are ostensibly his former fiancée, I was under the impression that you still occupy a special position."

"I do not," she said. "I swear upon the spirits who protect me that I occupy no such position." She paused, then asked, "Are you sure you do not have any other duties today? I do have the wards my teacher taught me to protect myself with, so I will be quite all right on my own."

Claire did not want to get in the way of Lui's work. Lui looked slightly mystified at Claire's stubbornness but then agreed.

"As you wish. Very well, my lady. I shall part with you here."

"Thank you for chaperoning me today. Busy as you must be, I am very happy to have spent this time with you."

Lui chuckled, her polite facial expression relaxing, as Claire thanked her again. The sight enticed Claire into a smile too.

There was a brief instant wherein Lui's calm, gentle gaze looked Claire over. Claire felt as if Lui was able to see everything about her.

"Truthfully," Lui said, "we could have arranged for someone else to chaperone you today."

"I beg your pardon?"

"However," said Lui, "when I met you on Lindel Island, I thought your ward was beautiful, and it made me hope for the opportunity to have a proper chat with you."

Claire blinked, and Lui continued. "My family is known for its affinity with magic. Every member of my family possesses a strong magical color, and we excel not only in knowledge of magic, but also the ability to use it."

"How interesting," Claire said. She already knew all of this thanks to her first life, but it stirred up a rush of emotion in her to have Lui tell her these same things.

"You must also be quite a gifted mage. If you ever have any issues, please do

not hesitate to come talk to me. I am sure that I will be able to help.”

“Thank you,” said Claire. She bowed her head, and Lui, after a slight bow of her own, jogged away to join Vik and the others.

I mustn't cry, Claire told herself. The one who had taught Claire to make wards was none other than Lui, but Lui had no way of knowing. As happy as Claire was to have come one step closer to her dear friend, she also felt a pang of loneliness that she was the only one to remember their friendship.

The castle was abuzz as its inhabitants awaited the Decennial Ceremony. Claire stood in the midst of all the commotion, engulfed in a whirlwind of emotions.

She returned to her room, whereupon she was beset by doubts. “I wonder what the reason could be for Prince Oswald not being here a year later,” she said to herself. What she considered to be the most likely hypothesis, namely that he had married and moved to a different kingdom, was apparently incorrect.

She tried to come up with reasons why another heir to the throne could suddenly disappear. *I suppose he could be banished*, she thought, *for taking an action that threatened the survival of the kingdom*. As she mentally leafed through the reference information she'd borrowed on Paffuto's history, she felt a chill run down her spine. Then she shook her head to dispel a troubling thought. *That simply can't be possible*, she thought. *After all, Vik always smiled so kindly at me*. Yet at the same time, it occurred to her now that she had only ever acted as Vik's ally.

Come to think of it, Claire did not have the faintest idea what Vik's weaknesses were. The man she knew always went around showing plenty of confidence and composure. He did indeed act his age when bantering with the young knights, but even then his princely demeanor never entirely vanished. *The Vik who is here right now is without a doubt growing up into the Vik I knew*, she thought. *However, there must be so many things I still don't know about him*.

It was nighttime, and a slightly chilly spring wind blew in through the wide-

open windows facing out into the total darkness outside. The faint sounds of music and people laughing over at the ball in the palace's great hall carried on the breeze.

I wonder what would happen if I told Vik I wanted to see the face he doesn't show in public, Claire thought. *Would that upset him?* She rested her cheek against the window frame and closed her eyes. Oswald's face, the face of the man whose existence had never been divulged to her, stared back at Claire from behind her eyelids. Today had been a joyous day for her, but she also understood that she had only seen what they wanted her to see.

The series of events related to Paffuto's Founding Day ended as a smashing success. Claire had spent these last few days as an ordinary guest watching the ceremony and parade. *I thought the same thing in my first life, but I am realizing again that Paffuto is such a large and powerful country,* Claire pondered. *Even for an event that occurs only once every ten years, the whole scale is so different from anything in Noston.*

She sat at the desk in her room, deep in thought, as she looked down at a textbook in her hands. Right now, the best thing for her to do was study hard at the Royal Academy of Paffuto. Paffish schools offered an exceptionally high level of education. Such a large country boasted experts in every field imaginable, and Paffuto supported education systems and intellectual institutions which covered an enormous breadth of topics.

In her last life, Vik had arranged for Claire to receive a personal plan of study, but in truth, she was not the only student to be treated that way. Another aspect of what made Paffuto so great was having enough specialists to allow for flexible education according to each pupil's talents.

In my last life, Claire mused, *they really began teaching me from the basics. My magic lessons were focused on teaching me how to control my magic and cast defensive spells, but I think I'd like to learn how to use more advanced spells this time around.*

This was Claire's second life, but she still retained all the magic and knowledge she had been imparted with in her first life. Even supposing that the

last horrible future repeated itself, she was sure she could do something about Charlotte this time around.

“I returned to Noston last time for the sake of having goodwill between our two kingdoms. And now I must protect Lui, which means I must study diligently. No matter what, I will not end up falling into the same rut as I did last time,” she vowed.

Besides, she added to herself as she gripped the book hard, I may end up living in Paffuto on my own in this life. And if that does happen, then I truly must study if I want to find any hope for my future.

Just then, there was a sudden knock on the door. Claire raised her head.

It was her brother Oscar who had come to see her.

“I am about to return home,” Oscar told her. “The next time I’ll see you will be in two years, after you’ve finished school.” He hesitated. “I know you may be disappointed about what has brought you here, but don’t be discouraged, and study hard here in Paffuto.”

“Yes, Oscar. I shall.” Claire pursed her lips over the cup of black tea Sophie had made for her; it emitted a nice floral scent.

Why was Oscar still kind to her in this life? No matter how she tried to forget, the memories of Oscar’s cruel treatment in her first life kept flashing through her mind.

Oscar was apparently convinced that Claire would study here for two years before returning to Noston. However, Claire did not have much hope that her father would allow such a thing. Nor did she want that for herself either. When she made her dutiful reply to Oscar, she puzzled over how best to navigate the rest of the conversation.

As he sat in front of Claire, Oscar’s gaze roamed to the writing desk in the corner of her room. “Is that one of the textbooks they use at the Academy sitting open on your desk?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I hear that there is an exam held at the start of term. But more importantly, there is just so much I’d love to learn from the Academy.”

“Not only that, but you learned quite a lot from the ceremony already. Consider me quite impressed, Claire.”

It was a new experience for Claire to receive such frank praise from her brother. She wasn't sure if he'd ever spoken to her this way even before her baptism. She worked to hide both her feelings of embarrassment and bewilderment by saying nothing and responding with only a smile.

“Actually,” Oscar admitted, “I've been a little bit concerned about how you would take the fact that father ordered you to go to Paffuto.”

“Oh, Oscar.”

“Perhaps the strength of your magic is not what Noston hoped for. However, your intelligence and compassion are more than enough to make up for that. It's truly a shame, but Charlotte can't fill the shoes you've left, Claire.”

This was the first time Claire had heard anything of the sort. It took her breath away.

Oscar, looking rather embarrassed, continued. “However, I must admit that I thought if you accepted how everyone began to treat you after your baptism without objecting, it would all end there. That is why, when I see you so cheerfully moving on here in Paffuto, I can say that I am truly proud to be your brother.”

In her first life, Claire had been simply saddened, nothing more, by the fact that her once-warm brother had turned so cold towards her. In particular, his treatment had always made her aware of her new status as the disgrace of the Martino family. As a result, she had resolved to never cry in front of her brother in this new life. It was not that she was annoyed at him for it; rather, she did not want to remember the time when she had lost all faith in herself.

Yet in spite of her resolution, tears filled her eyes and blurred her vision. *That's what Oscar was thinking?* she thought. *I had no idea. I simply felt let down by myself and everyone around me.*

After Charlotte received her white magic, she had begun controlling Asbert, her brothers, and her father. However, according to Lui, the effects of the brainwashing were all the stronger for any jealousy, envy, or distrust for Claire

harbored in each of the victim's minds. *I never realized that these unpleasant elements were present in me too*, Claire thought.

Oscar's eyes were red as Claire tried to keep her emotions in check. He reseated himself next to her and gently ruffled her hair. "No matter what color of magic you have," he said, "that won't change the fact that I know you can do great things. Father thinks the same. We know you'll do your best so that you can come back to us again with a big smile. Just wait for us a little, okay?"

It was all Claire could do to answer, "Thank you very much, Oscar."

"By the way, I had a chance to talk to Prince Vik in person at the ball the other night. He is still only fifteen but has a remarkable reputation both at home and abroad. We only spoke briefly, but I also came away with a great impression of him. I'm sure you'll learn quite a lot if you go to school together. Do try to give him your support if you ever find a chance."

Claire was silent. She appreciated how tactfully Oscar had switched the topic, but she felt it was much too soon for this. The fact that Oscar couldn't hide his hopes that the Martino family could produce two queen consorts for different royal families made her giggle. *Oh, Oscar*, she thought. *You've ruined my emotional moment.*

"I understand," she said. "I will do so if I find an opportunity."

"There is also a Prince Oswald who is second in line for the throne. Popular opinion has it that the king does not consider anyone but Vik to be his legitimate heir, but there is a faction of voices that support Prince Oswald. Do your best to steer clear of that mess."

"So that's really true?" she asked, unable to contain herself when Oscar brought up the topic of the man she was so curious about.

"Is what true? What, did you notice?" Oscar paused for a moment. "A grand country though it may be, the embers of revolution are smoldering in Paffuto. It is impossible for the dynasty to change, but there are aristocrats who think they'd at least like to hold all real power. Prince Oswald is more easily susceptible to their charms than good Prince Vik. Some even believe that it will not be long before the wheels begin turning. But I'm sure you'll find your way through all of this, Claire."

Claire gasped internally as she recognized what Oscar was talking about.
“Thank you for the information, Oscar. I will indeed be careful.”

Chapter 6

Today was Claire's first day at the Royal Academy. She had already grown familiar with the uniform in her previous life, but this was her first time donning it since she had returned to being fifteen. Before, her hair had barely brushed her shoulders, and its new length made for a fresh sight in the mirror.

"You look wonderful in that uniform, Miss," Sophie said as she brought Claire her bag.

"Thank you." Claire sighed. "I must admit that I am a bit nervous about today."

"Knowing you, Miss, I'm sure you'll be just fine. You'll make friends in no time."

"I shall certainly do my best. I'm heading out now."

Claire left the room as Sophie sent her off with a warm smile.

A coach was to bring Claire to and from school. It would typically pick her up directly in front of her detached palace, or so she had been told, but for today only she planned to set off from the palace itself in order to make a show of her gratitude towards the country of Paffuto.

Claire followed the route through the rear garden that Lui had shown her the other day. The lush trees were radiant, the morning air pleasantly cool. There remained some patches of shadow which the climbing sun had yet to illuminate.

Oh? Claire thought. At the back of the detached palace, near the main palace itself, stood a familiar figure deep in conversation with one other person. *No*, she thought. *This is no simple conversation. It looks closer to some sort of clandestine meeting.*

Just as Claire murmured to herself, "It's Prince Oswald," the man himself turned to look in her direction.

“Miss Claire,” he said. “Good morning.”

Oswald’s companion gave Claire a slight bow and then smoothly withdrew. He was a remarkably tall man, Claire noticed, with dark black hair.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” she said. Claire beamed at him, crinkling her eyes to disguise the fact that she had unintentionally followed his conversation partner’s departure with her gaze.

“You are starting at the Royal Academy today, are you not?” Oswald asked.

“Oh, yes. Today is my first day of school, so I am rather nervous.”

“I used to attend that same school up until a few years ago myself. My, but that does bring me back. Do take care, now.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Although his facial features and hair color were different in every way from Vik’s, his smile looked remarkably similar. Claire found herself on the verge of unintentionally dropping her guard around him. *Oscar even told me not to*, she reminded herself. *I must remain vigilant.*

After she watched Oswald walk back into the palace, Claire set off on her way, only to find that...

“The coach is...gone, you say?” Claire repeated.

“Yes, our sincerest apologies.” Wiping his sweating brow, the coachman bowed to her. “There was a mistake, and Your Ladyship’s coach was given over to the use of someone else.”

Indeed, as he had said, Claire’s coach appeared to have driven off with a completely different passenger.

Then perhaps I should turn to teleportation, she thought. Teleportation was a high-level magical spell that consumed quite a lot of power in a single use, meaning it could not be utilized for anything but urgent emergencies. However, Claire did not find it particularly difficult. She had planned on taking a coach to school to prevent anyone from learning that her magic color was not, in fact, light pink, but drastic times called for drastic measures.

“No matter,” she said. “I will make my way to school via another method.

Thank you for your time.”

She smiled at the poor mortified coachman, but just then, a voice coming from above her head suggested, “In that case, why don’t you ride with me?”

“Your Highness,” Claire gasped.

There stood Vik in his school uniform, apparently just about to set off for the Academy.

Claire rushed to decline his offer. It was simply impossible for her to share a carriage with him, lacking any sort of close relationship as they were. “I am terribly grateful for the offer,” she said, “but it would not be fitting for someone of my status. I will take another route to school, so please do not concern yourself with me.”

“Won’t that make you late for the first day of school?” he asked.

Claire fell silent. Vik did not wait for her to reply and instead climbed into the coach before holding out his hand to her as if welcoming her in. He was simply offering to escort Claire to school as the honored guest she was, but the sight of his composed expression brought back memories. She knew that she shouldn’t, yet her hand moved of its own volition, letting Vik help her into the coach.

Claire sat down next to Vik and he, perhaps picking up on how nervous she was, gave her an impish grin. “I see you remembered your shoes today.”

Claire gasped. “You must be talking about the incident on the beach at Lindel Island. I promise, I don’t normally do such things, so I must please ask that you don’t tell other people.”

Vik grinned. “Sure.” Still smiling, he turned his attention to the view outside the window.

Those few simple words, meant to lighten the atmosphere between them, made Claire’s heart swell with feeling. *He’s always so considerate*, she thought. *He really hasn’t changed at all!*

“The Martinos are a distinguished family in Noston, are they not?” Vik asked. “Your older brother even accompanied the king in the delegation.”

“Yes, that is certainly what some say,” answered Claire. She hesitated before adding, “I’m afraid that no longer has anything to do with me, though.”

“Whatever story that is must be connected to why you’re studying abroad, I take it?” As casual as his response was, it still proved that he was perceptive as ever. He must have made the connection with the extraordinary circumstances Claire had touched on during their conversation on Lindel Island.

“Yes,” she said. “I fear that even after my two years of school are finished, there will be no place for me in my family’s home. I intend to learn as much as I can to make a good foundation so that I might support myself alone after the fact.”

“So it’s that kind of extraordinary circumstance, huh?” Vik said, sounding surprised and genuinely impressed. “You certainly take a farsighted approach, don’t you? I didn’t expect that something like this could happen to the member of a family powerful enough to receive a request for special hospitality by the royal family of Noston.”

A slight pang of discomfort grew in Claire’s heart when she heard his tone of voice. *Why do I feel something about this isn’t quite right?* she wondered.

Wanting to know the answer, she continued her explanation. “I have a younger sister who is exceptional. More talented than I am, really. I was also once engaged to Prince Asbert, the Crown Prince of Noston. However, I began studying abroad so as to make it more socially appropriate for His Highness to marry my sister instead.”

Vik hesitated a moment before saying, “Really now? I must say, the level of consideration he’s shown for you is beyond what one would expect in recompense for breaking off an engagement.”

“That is certainly true,” said Claire. “I apologize for the inconvenience.” Surely Vik was imagining that Asbert had some sort of special feelings for Claire, and she did not know how best to reply to that.

Just then, she abruptly realized what her earlier discomfort had actually been. In her first life, Claire, Vik, and the others had talked in lias about the particulars which had led to her being driven from Noston. Vik had sympathized with her, mentioning that he was well aware of stories like hers. However, while the

circumstances this time around were slightly different, she felt no such sympathy from him. Overlapping with this was Oswald's shadowy smile during the conversation she'd just had with him. *Although*, she thought, *I do hope that this is only my imagination.*

Claire's face morphed into a serious frown as her mood took a sudden downturn and Vik, mistaking the cause of her disquiet, said, "Say, about Lui..."

The tenderness in his voice made Claire tilt her head in curiosity. "What about Sir Lui?" she asked.

"She's taken quite an interest in you," he said. "I wondered what kind of person you were for Lui to think so highly of you, so I had you ride in my carriage today."

Realizing that he must have been testing her while she'd remained unaware, Claire shrugged her shoulders and giggled. "Well, what did you think?"

"You're not too shabby," he joked.



Vik's face looked as calm and unruffled as when he had first invited her into the coach, and yet there was now a hint of true friendliness in his words to her. Claire's heart sang.

The pair parted once they arrived at the school gates. In this life, Claire was a student from an influential Nostonian noble family. That she would attract plenty of attention was a given, so it made no difference whether or not she separated from Vik now. However, today she first needed to find the teachers and introduce herself. Vik had offered to show her the way but Claire, of course, had politely turned him down.

Once her introductions were complete, Claire set off for the lecture hall, thinking as she went, *The Academy is exactly as I remember it*. In her past life, she hadn't started attending until one year after the present date.

The school building was an ornate edifice situated on sweeping grounds. The central garden resembled those in the royal palace with its elaborately landscaped beauty. Its scenery was worthy of a school made only for the sons and daughters of nobility in such a grand country.

Presently, Claire noticed no difference from her previous experience with the school. As she had expected, the term began with a test to determine which class each student would fall into. All eyes turned to her the moment she stepped into the lecture hall where the test was to take place. This, too, was as she had expected. *It's rare for anyone of my particular status to go abroad to study*, she thought.

Paffuto certainly had its fair share of transfer students, and each region of the country possessed its own Royal Academy. The class roster changing at the start of term was perfectly par for the course. Yet with that being said, as Claire found an empty seat and sat down, she clearly stuck out like a sore thumb. Hadn't it been drilled into all these young nobles from birth that it was rude to stare? *This must also be thanks to Asbert's demand that I be treated as a special guest*, she thought ruefully. Many of Claire's new classmates were the children of important people in the government, so the rumors about her must have originated from them. It seemed that no matter what kingdom one lived in,

interesting gossip spread like wildfire.

Just as Claire was beginning to feel fed up with all this nonsense, a familiar, clear voice made her lift her gaze. “My name is Lydia Carrere. May I take this seat next to you?”

Lady Lydia! Claire thought. This was her dear friend Lydia, who had also talked to her on her true first day of school at the Royal Academy.

Claire stumbled over her words as she said, “Of course. My name is Claire Martino, and I’ve come from Noston to study here.”

“Oh my, you are from Noston? Well, if there’s ever anything you don’t understand, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you.”

Lydia had been born into a distinguished noble family in Paffuto and avoided anything to do with Vik at the Academy. She preferred to stay away from drama and live a peaceful life, which Claire, who had already risen to and fallen from grace once before, understood all too well. *Given that, I’m surprised she chose to talk to me even while knowing that I am being treated as an honored guest,* Claire thought.

As Lydia gave Claire a gentle, dignified smile, Claire saw Vik a ways off. For some reason, he was looking in their direction with interest.

Lydia giggled. “Since you noticed, I suppose I should fill you in. His Highness and I have known each other since we were children. He’s been telling me all about you, so I thought that you and I would get along well.”

“Pardon me,” Claire said, “but what sort of things has he been saying about me?”

Claire looked at Lydia, talking away in the same calm and moderated voice that she remembered, and reflected on her good fortune. *By any chance,* she wondered, *did this also happen in my first life?*

Only a few weeks had passed since Claire started attending the Academy, and she’d made great progress in her general education classes. Now the time for

students to begin their private lessons had arrived. Here, individual differences in each student's ability were key. While, naturally, placement test scores determined which class pupils were in for their main lessons, in private lessons the color of one's magic affected which professor worked with which student.

On that note, Claire sat alone in the cafeteria and worried over how she should disclose the color of her magic. *Once my private lessons begin, she thought, they'll discover that my magical color isn't light pink. This wasn't a problem in my first life, but the same no longer holds true. This time, I still have Noston's support. Considering that the details of my time abroad here in Paffuto are spreading, it is inevitable that Noston will find out sooner or later.*

Claire's so-called light pink magic made her a failure to live up to the Martino name but it was, in a general sense, nothing to be ashamed of. None but aristocrats received magical powers, but even then precious few of them possessed the most superior colors.

The paper that Claire had received earlier from the school administration informed her that the magician she had been assigned to was named Cheinz, the same teacher who had given her private lessons in her first life. Cheinz possessed blue magic and was undeniably quite talented in his work, but there was always something otherworldly and not quite teacher-like about the man.

In my first life, Claire thought, the Paffish side knew from the start that I had a magical color stronger than white. However, probably thanks to Vik's support, no one ever asked too many questions about it.

Cheinz would surely keep her secret if she requested it of him; however, the magic she wanted to learn was too high-level for anyone with pink magic to cast. Even if the professor kept the secret for her, Claire knew it was only a matter of time before someone on the Nostonian side learned she'd received her true magic color. *And truthfully, she told herself, some part of me does just want to tell Vik.* Yet naturally, she couldn't fulfill this desire, for Vik was not yet her friend, much less her lover and confidant.

Suddenly, a colorful bouquet of flowers on the table caught her eye. In the midst of all the gaiety, one dull, withered flower drooped. It didn't appear wilted as much as somehow sick. Still lost in thought, Claire plucked the flower

from the vase and cradled it in both hands.

“Oh spirits, in exchange for my power, I beseech you to purify this blossom,” she chanted, whereupon a soft light glowed in her palm, and the flower was restored to full life.

There, she thought, all better now. As she returned the flower to the vase, Claire heard the scraping sound of a chair being pulled out next to her.

“That was some high-level magic you just performed.”

“Oh, Your Highness,” said Claire. “You have not returned home as of yet?”

“You aren’t the only one who had other business to attend to.”

Vik casually waved a paper at her. Like the one in Claire’s possession, it showed his assigned teacher for private magic lessons; also like Claire, said teacher was Cheinz.

This cafeteria was deserted until just a moment ago, I’m sure of it, Claire thought. *Still, I was so careless!*

Vik put his chin in his hands and gave Claire a look as if he could see how flustered she felt inside. “So you can use magic like that when you’re only fifteen, huh? Maybe you just had an amazing teacher, but that explanation doesn’t quite cut it.”

“What are you referring to?” she asked. She knew full well that she couldn’t fool him, but she decided to try playing innocent for now.

“That purification magic,” Vik said. “You did a splendid job of it.”

Oh, bother. It was no use after all.

“It is a long story,” she said. “This is...something that I would ever so much appreciate if you kept secret from my family in Noston.”

“Why? You’re our honored guest with the support of the royal family of Noston at your back. I can’t agree to that so easily.”

Claire frowned at Vik’s persistence, but what he’d said *was* perfectly sensible. *How much should I tell him?* she wondered.

While still seated next to her, Vik picked the recently purified flower out of

the vase and stared at it intently. The imbalance between his brisk tone and completely relaxed actions must have been deliberate, Claire supposed.

“It relates to what we discussed earlier in the coach,” she began. “Prince Asbert and I ended our engagement because the prince had eyes for another.”

Vik was silent for a moment before saying, “I see.”

“At my baptism, I failed to live up to what was expected of me. However, that served as an opportunity for Prince Asbert and his sweetheart to be united. I have no desire to intrude on their love, hence why I ask you to please keep this a secret.”

After another momentary pause, Vik said, “I saw the results of the class placement test. This is the first time anyone’s ever scored higher than me.”

“Oh yes,” said Claire, thinking back to her first life. “I am aware.”

Vik cocked his head in confusion at her response.

“But your sister is even better than you, you said?” he asked.

Claire jolted. Vik’s eyes were as perceptive as ever. She smiled to mask the fact that she was unable to find a proper response.

Although Vik had not agreed to keep Claire’s secret, he seemed willing to heed the request regardless. Cheinz noticed the irregularity in Claire’s magical color at their first private lesson, but he only said, “His Highness was kind enough to inform me,” smiled at her, and left it at that. In the letters from Charlotte, there was no sign that she nor anyone else in the family knew that Claire’s magic color was anything but light pink. At any rate, life was going well for Claire.

“And so,” she asked, “may I inquire why Your Highness is sitting in on my lessons?”

“Pay me no mind,” he told her with a big grin. “Now continue.”

Alarmed, Claire looked to Cheinz for help, but she found no rescue there. Her professor was, naturally, on the side of his monarch. *Ugh*, Claire thought. *How has it come to this?*

Today's lesson was about magical brainwashing. In order to understand the particulars of how Charlotte had won over Asbert and the Martinos' hearts, Claire had previously confided to Cheinz that she wished to learn more about the subject. Yet what was Vik doing here?

The school offered individual programs for the many young noblemen and women who simultaneously performed special duties for their kingdom. To prevent the students from returning home too late, lessons were scheduled on a priority basis. Being the crown prince, Vik's lesson occupied the time slot before Claire's. He had finished already and therefore should have vacated to make room for Claire, and yet here he was.

"I can't help but think it'd be rather odd for me to pay you no mind, Your Highness," she told him, a reserved and yet clear refusal.

Vik answered breezily, "I seem to be hearing that a lot from you lately, Miss Claire."

Claire had lived in Paffuto for a month as a guest in the royal palace, and she was already beginning to form a connection with Vik as she had in her first life. Granted, it was not the close friendship they'd once shared which had made for frequent conversations and tea parties in Claire's room. However, they did greet one another when they crossed paths and often spent lunchtimes together—of course, not without Lydia and other students present as well. She and Vik were not especially close friends, but she at least felt as though she was another of his school friends, which brought her some measure of happiness.

"He said he'd like to see you perform a high-level magic spell," Cheinz said, indicating Vik. "Will that be a problem?"

"No, but...pardon me..." Claire protested.

"Given that we'll be doing a practical lesson today, I believe this is perfect timing! I was just thinking that I'd like to have someone else around for you to practice on."

Claire frowned at that. Cheinz wasn't treating Vik like a prince, and she had a nasty feeling about this.

"Professor?" she said.

“If you wish to learn to control a person’s will by magical means, it is faster to learn by doing than to listen to any detailed explanation. For now, all you need to do is summon your magic to the surface of your body and say the words. There is no need to actually beseech the spirits.”

“Wow,” said Vik, sitting in a sunny spot near the window. “This sounds interesting. Very well, Miss Claire. I’m ready when you are.”

Looking amused, he left his seat and moved next to Claire. She paled and thought, *I can’t believe this is happening*. Vik appeared intent on becoming her guinea pig, and the fact that the teacher made no move to stop this only raised further issues.

“Hold on, please,” she said. “I simply cannot do something like this to the prince.”

“But how else will you learn?” Cheinz asked. Paying no mind to Claire’s concerns, he continued his explanation. “Incidentally, your magical color is even stronger than white, isn’t it? You need at least white magic to bypass wards and exert control over someone via magic. This same rule applies for both casting and dispelling the magic. It is crucial.”

This was quite a serious matter, and yet Vik did not look bothered in the slightest. “I don’t mind if you brainwash me,” he said. “One of my retainers is powerful enough to lift the spell. Why, so long as I’m making it simple for you, isn’t this really the perfect opportunity for you to learn?”

As he laughed at her teasingly, Claire realized he must have been talking about Lui. She knew full well that Vik was the type who would never hear a word against something once he had suggested it. There was no getting around this; she would simply have to brainwash him.

“Very well,” she said.

However, she thought, I wonder how I should influence him. I’d best choose something that won’t have any effect if I slip up somehow. She contemplated the matter for a few moments before it came to her. *Ah!* She knew just what to try that would not cause an issue for anyone.

Claire summoned her magic to the surface of her body, and a faint light shone

around her.

“You need to use a bit more power,” Cheinz advised. “You won’t have any effect using that little magic.”

“Yes, professor,” she said. At his urging, Claire increased the amount of power she channeled to the surface of her body. She could clearly see the magic now, but she still could not tell what color it was. Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead.

“Your Highness,” she said.

“Yes?”

Vik rested his chin in his hands on the tabletop and looked at Claire, eyes shining with amusement. He rarely showed himself to be this relaxed here at school.

“Cheddar cheese sandwiches,” she began.

“What? Cheddar cheese?” He repeated, baffled. His eyes glittered as he apparently had some inkling where Claire was taking this.

In my first life, Vik told me that cheddar cheese sandwiches were his favorite food, she thought. What is the harm in changing something as simple as his food preferences? I’m sure it will be all right.

Yet, the instant she made to continue, Cheinz said, “Miss Martino?”

His words prompted her to realize that the magic on her body was now receding. *What is this?* she thought. Up until a moment ago, she had been overflowing with magic, but now it was entirely gone.

“Professor,” she said, “what does this mean?”

“It is as I suspected,” he said. “Brainwashing cannot be invoked if the caster hesitates in any way. Remember that from now on.”

“Y-Yes,” she stammered. She didn’t fully understand him, but she nodded anyway. It appeared that, to Cheinz, this result was one of several outcomes he had expected.

“Did her magic disappear because of the wards I have on me?” Vik asked.

“I think not. My belief is that Miss Martino herself did not wish to brainwash you. That, and that alone, caused the issue, did it not?”

Claire shook her head. “No. I was fully prepared to change His Highness’s mind.”

“This spell is a direct magic, you see. Remember that from now on. Its usage depends upon not only the magical ability of its caster but also their relationship with the person the spell will be inflicted upon. A hesitating mage such as yourself and someone protected by the finest wards, like His Highness, together make for the least optimal combination.”

Claire hesitated before saying, “I understand.” Using magical power to control someone else’s mind was quite hard, she realized. Failing to cast the spell correctly frustrated her, yet she felt her heart sink further when she realized that this failure was linked to the anxiety that had plagued her through the entire operation. *This means, she thought, that Charlotte is strong-minded enough to cast this spell correctly.*

Cheinz suddenly looked grave as he addressed Claire. “Now you understand the theory of how a mind can be controlled through magic, yes? The most important takeaway here is that, given your magical ability, you must never speak a heedless word should your magic ever run out of control. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Incidentally, the most high-level brainwashing spell is called Mesmerizing. Brainwashing is challenging enough, but fewer still can manage Mesmerizing. Its usage is tricky as well; one must reach the deepest regions of the victim’s psyche in order to accomplish it. Well, but we still have another year before we can come to that. Of course, we won’t practice it ourselves. Mesmerizing cannot be undone, you see.”

Mesmerizing, Claire pondered. Charlotte doesn’t like studying much, so I suppose I don’t need to worry about her learning this.

As she began to close up her notebook, Vik turned to her with an upset look for some reason Claire could not fathom.

“Miss Claire, what sort of foods do you like?” he asked.

Claire was puzzled. “Well, I prefer fish to other meats, and I suppose I enjoy sweet things.”

“Have I ever eaten a cheddar cheese sandwich with you in the cafeteria?”

“You haven’t. They are not on the menu to begin with, Your Highness.”

“So, what kind of foods *do* you like? Give me an actual example.”

Claire hesitated before answering, “I like pancakes with maple syrup.”

Vik must have been puzzled over where Claire had suddenly pulled cheddar cheese sandwiches from, she assumed. The way he asked her about her favorite foods in return made him sound just like a child. She smiled, remembering fondly this slightly pushy side of Vik. Cheinz likewise couldn’t help but chuckle to himself as he overheard their conversation, and he returned to the inner room.

“You’re the right sort of person to have such strong magical powers,” Vik told Claire.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked.

Vik looked at her as if she was dazzlingly talented. Claire’s eyes opened wide at his expression.

“No matter how powerful one’s magic may be,” Vik explained, “nothing good can come of an inexperienced mage. Education is important, but what one is born with makes a difference as well. Anyway, did you ask Lydia what my favorite food is? I can’t believe you were about to change it back there.”

Vik looked as if he was about to burst into laughter at any moment, and Claire turned red.

“Well, that is because...” she began. *I was trying to come up with something that would have as little effect as possible and remembered that, she thought. I had no other choice.*

She covered her bright red cheeks with her hands. Yet before she could answer him, Vik said, “Sorry. I promise I won’t breathe a word of your true magical color to anyone.”

Claire was taken aback.

“I also understand the reason for your complicated circumstances. You must know what I mean too.”

Said reason was Claire’s desire not to interfere with the love between Prince Asbert and Charlotte. Of course, that was only partially true. In actuality, the most important point of Claire’s strategy was that having Asbert near Charlotte prevented her from coming up with any strange ideas. Additionally, Claire also had the slightly self-serving interests of promoting peace between the two kingdoms and securing her own personal freedom.

After a moment, she said, “I am really not the lovely kind of person you are making me out to be.” For Claire had chosen to restart her life all for the sake of her own singular wish. She lowered her eyes.

“You live in the midst of some considerably complex circumstances,” Vik told her. “Accept the compliments.”

Claire was silent for a moment longer before she said, “Thank you very much.” She could not deny his words any longer. She forced down her complicated feelings and gave him a smile.

“Well,” Vik said falteringly. Real emotion peeked out through his voice. “Sibling relationships are harder than you’d think, you know?”

“That they are,” she said. “What may appear to be going well on the surface may not indeed be so deep down.”

“Hey,” he said. “What, do you think I have a set of complicated circumstances too?”

“Nonsense,” she said. “I would never think such a thing.”

Vik made a carefree grin in direct opposition to his words. Claire had often seen this expression before, and the sense of closeness she now felt filled her with a wave of emotion for the past.

The weather warmed up in no time at all. The Royal Academy offered a summer holiday for its pupils because, in keeping with the social season, many

nobles took this opportunity to travel between their homes in the capital and their estates. As a result, a transfer student arriving at the end of the holidays was no uncommon thing.

Claire had just finished studying in the palace library and was about to return to her own rooms in the detached palace when she heard Vik's voice behind her. "It's been too long," he said. "Have you been keeping well?"

She stopped and broke out into a smile at the sight of him. "Indeed it has, Your Highness," she said. "All thanks to you, I've had a lovely holiday."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. "I myself only just arrived home from an excursion out to the kingdom of Lupty."

"I am glad to see you made it home safely."

The trees in the courtyard, gay and brilliant in the light of the day, were bathed a sepia tone by the rays of the setting sun. A slightly humid evening breeze rustled their leaves.

"The kingdom of Lupty supports itself through tourism," Vik explained. "The towns and the people were all...really, just excellent."

He sat down on a bench in the hallway as he continued to talk. Claire was at a loss. *What should I do?* she wondered. In her first life, she would have quite naturally sat down next to him and carried on a conversation, yet that was because she and Vik had been good friends.

Shyly, she stepped up in front of the bench. Vik tapped the spot next to him.

"Excuse me," Claire said.

"By all means."

He smiled, pleased, when she lowered herself to sit next to him.

"Until I began to study here in Paffuto," she said, "I'd never been to any other kingdom."

"Really now? Is that what made you start playing on the beach in Lindel?"

"I do wish you'd forget that," she sighed. Was that going to haunt her for the rest of her life? Why, oh why, hadn't she put her boots back on faster?

She cursed herself bitterly, but Vik continued on, apparently only having mentioned the shoe issue as a lead-in to further conversation.

“Come to think of it,” he said, “you were concerned about the matter of that beach being filled in, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Claire. The news that the Mead family wanted to fill in the beach had spread far and wide throughout the kingdom. Claire had already been baptized, but she still didn’t think any good could come of filling in such a beautiful source of healing holy water. Even if it had not come to pass yet, the mention of it alone filled her with sadness.

“The new school term begins tomorrow,” Vik said. “The son of Earl Mead, the one who wants to fill in the beach, will be transferring into our class.”

Claire started. *What is the meaning of this?* she thought. *Lord Dion isn’t supposed to transfer in for another year.*

Ever since she had heard news of the proposed filling in, a doubt had begun growing in her mind. In her first life, Dion had used his curse, Collective Magic, on Claire—only for it to bounce back onto him. As a result, she now seemed to be encroaching on Dion’s power instead of the reverse. *What if, in my last life when I used the purification spell, Dion also blacked out?* she wondered. *I cannot discount the possibility that I brought Dion into this life with me.*

The sudden realization made her whole body tremble. The Mead family was working to destroy the spring on Lindel Island which Claire had needed to be baptized in, something that had not occurred at all in her first life. Furthermore, now Dion was transferring to the Academy a year early. All of these facts pointed to one answer only.

Her fingertips, resting on top of her knees, grew cold. She could no longer feel the pleasant breeze, and the rustling of the leaves thundered in her brain.

By the time Claire became aware of her surroundings again, Vik’s clear eyes were directly in front of her. “Are you all right?” he asked.

His face being so close startled Claire. Then she recognized he must have been watching her. “I’m sorry,” she said, stumbling over the words. “I was a bit caught up in thought.”

“I thought I’d tell you, as it has some pertinence for you. Earl Mead’s son, Dion, uses a close-range curse called Collective Magic. Defending yourself from it is crucial. As you are our honored guest, I would have liked to give you guards, but Lui says someone as talented as yourself has no need of them. What are your thoughts on this?”

Now Claire finally understood why Vik had invited her to come sit on the bench with him. He must have wanted to ask her what she thought of having a guard given to her. Claire’s happiness at having him closer than usual mixed with fresh loneliness once she understood the reason for his behavior.

She didn’t want Vik to notice this, so she gave him a larger smile than normal. “If Sir Lui approves, then I have no need.”

“I see.” Vik nodded mildly and then held out a paper bag in his hand to Claire.

“What is this?” she asked.

“Maple syrup.”

“Maple syrup?” she repeated. She took the bag from him and blinked. She could feel the heavy weight of a jar within it. Sure enough, it was maple syrup. But—*Why?* she thought. *Why is he giving me this?*

“I remembered you mentioning this while I was on my trip. I was just about to bring it over to you at the detached palace when I ran into you here. I only brought up Dion Mead since we were already talking.”

Claire was shocked. “Thank you,” she said, gripping the bag tightly.

Vik smiled back bashfully. Afterwards, he continued to tell her about his trip, with the majority of his stories focusing less on the details of the official duties of his tour and more on the fun downtime shared with his retainers. He described every scene so vividly Claire felt as if she could reach out and touch them. It was a miraculous evening, retrieving and enjoying the times she had lost.

That night, Claire mixed a drop of maple syrup into a cup of hot milk and tried a sip. The mild sweetness melted on her tongue the moment it entered her mouth. *He remembered that I said I like maple syrup,* she thought. *Then he*

thought of me on his trip. A feeling of happiness spread through her bit by bit as she sat on her bed and hugged her knees to herself. Maybe it didn't mean anything, but this small fragment of Vik's special feelings for her reminded her of the past.

"But things aren't the same as they were before," she reminded herself. To regain her composure, she shook her head and reassessed her anxieties about tomorrow. *In my past life, it was highly probable that the Mead family were involved in the attack on Lindel that happened several decades ago, Claire thought. Furthermore, they had been driven to the verge of downfall for endangering the crown prince's fiancée. If Dion came from this same past life, then this bodes trouble. Which life is this boy from? Does he know about me? I absolutely must find out.*

As she mulled over these thoughts, the fragrance from the warm milk on her side table lulled her to sleep. Before she knew it, she was already sinking into bed.

Claire left for the Royal Academy the next morning earlier than she was accustomed to. The sweet feelings of last night had vanished, and as the image of Dion had filled her mind from the minute she'd awoken, she could not bear to sit still and do nothing. Decades ago, the powerful House Mead had worked behind the scenes to bring about the downfall of Lindel. Claire's mother, the princess of Lindel, had been shepherded to safety as a mere three-year-old, but even then, as Claire had discovered in her first life, the Meads' sinister ambitions lived on.

My mother was still a toddler at the time of the attack, but that made no difference, she thought. She was killed decades later so that the truth would never come out. Wicked blood flows in the veins of the Meads. I would like to, if possible, meet Dion before classes start and see just what he intends to do by transferring here.

Claire climbed the familiar staircase within the school building and peeked into the classroom. However, there was no one present outside of a handful of people at this time, and Claire sighed. *It appears Dion is not here yet, she thought. I wonder what class he will be in.*

Just then, a voice behind her said, “Are you perhaps concerned about the young master Mead?”

“Your Highness!” Claire cried. “Good morning.”

Vik was likewise somewhat earlier than normal. “Lui said that you should be fine, considering the strength of your wards,” he reminded her.

“Oh, no, it isn’t that,” she said.

Yes, she was concerned about Dion, but not because of his magic. The reason for her concern also involved the royal family. The Meads possessed a magic that could compel the royal family to act as their protectors, hence why they wished to harm Claire. If she could get closer to Vik, Claire thought that she would like to discuss her worries with him. It was heartening enough to know that she could talk to him if the worst ever were to occur. *However, she thought, depending on what Dion is doing here, I may have to tell Vik the whole story at once.*

“Is something else bothering you?” Vik asked, his face likewise morphing into a frown as he saw Claire looking more somber than usual.

Considering her station, Claire knew that she must not be any friendlier with Vik than what was necessary. However, the jar of maple syrup from yesterday flashed through her mind and pushed her to speak up.

“Excuse me,” she said. “If you don’t mind, I would like to consult with you about something.”

“A full consultation?”

At that moment, the door behind them opened, and a gust of wind blew through the open classroom window. Claire slowly turned around, and there she saw a familiar face.

The boy had a unique air about him, as if he came from a faraway kingdom, and the moment he opened the door, he saw Claire and stiffened. Something that looked like fear registered in those striking yellow eyes of his.

“M-Miss Claire!” he cried. “Why are you here?”

Claire instantly understood without the need to ask Dion anything. She had,

without a doubt, brought Dion along with her into her second life.

“Do you want to talk now?”

Claire, packing up her things at the end of the school day, responded to Vik with a smile. “Yes, today will work. Thank you for being so considerate.”

“You think this is considerate? At any rate, we’re both going home to the same place anyway. Come ride with me in my coach and we can talk there.”

“I’m most grateful,” she said. “But I’m afraid I have a previous engagement today.”

“Do you now?” He regarded her with suspicion but left for the coaches all the same.

This was the first time Vik had ever invited her to share the ride home, and Claire also wanted to thank him once more for the maple syrup from yesterday. However, today she had a more pressing appointment to make.

I wonder if Dion has gone home already, Claire thought. She hurried to the lecture hall used in their general education classes, now free of students after school.

In her first life, on the day when Dion had transferred into the Academy, Claire had been so attentive of her wards she’d nearly made herself a nervous wreck, but today she felt no need to recast them. *If my suspicions are correct, then Dion knows full well the danger of casting his curse on me.*

Claire opened the appointed room’s door and shut it behind her with a click of the lock. The sound made a figure jump in surprise.

“Thank you for waiting for me, Lord Dion,” Claire said.

The lecture hall was a spacious room with tables and chairs situated on ascending tiers. Dion huddled on a chair in the corner, his knees pulled close to his chest.

“Miss Claire,” he said, so quietly she could barely hear it from across the room. “I take it you know who I am?”

In her memories, Dion had acted conspicuously to the point of being overly

self-conscious, but the boy who quailed in front of her now was a mere shadow of his former self.

She slowly walked up to him as she said, "Yes, I do. And it appears that you know who I am just as well."

Dion was silent for a moment before he admitted, "I thought I'd have a bit more time before you made it to Paffuto. Now all my plans are ruined."

"Lord Dion, are you not also a year early in transferring into the Academy?"

Dion had been unable to hide his clear shock when he first saw Claire this morning. Seeing this reaction had convinced Claire that she and Dion had come from the same timeline while simultaneously alerting her to the fact that Dion's goal in transferring here must not have been to get close to her. Yet Claire could not, no matter how she tried, ascertain what his goal could be, and thus she had asked him to meet her here.

"I was told that I was unconscious for over a week after failing to cast my Collective Magic on you. When I returned home, my lord grandfather disowned me, and then one night, a mysterious light surrounded me. By the time I realized what was happening, I found myself back to where I was several months prior," Dion explained haltingly.

Then her conjecture was true, Claire realized. At the same time she had blacked out, Dion's consciousness had likewise faded out in the previous world of her first life.

"You know all about me, don't you?" he said. "And you must also know about my family's fate. I honestly thought I had a chance to set it all right now that I had returned to the past. That's why I came here, to beat you to it."

"Beat me to what?" she asked.

"To becoming friends with His Highness."

"With Vik?"

"Yes," he said. "You stand between my family and our success. That's why at first I tried to have the holy spring on Lindel Island destroyed so you couldn't be baptized, but it turned out to be quite a lengthy process. My lord grandfather

opted for doing away with you without bothering with such tedium, but when we looked into it, we realized that you were actually the fiancée of the Crown Prince of Noston, were you not? There was no way we could get our hands on you like that. You're really quite something, aren't you?"

Dion spoke listlessly, his face likewise a vacant mask of despair. He sounded hopeless, as if he had given up on everything. As he carelessly related his story, Claire's heart began to prickle with discomfort.

"Does this mean that your family truly believes you traveled back in time?" she asked.

"Yes. My lord father and grandfather did not believe me at first, but once I mentioned the name of the Martinos of Noston, they immediately rushed to act according to my orders. Yet in the end, we realized that it was taking too long to fill in the spring. Therefore, we decided to run a second strategy in tandem with the first, namely for me to befriend His Highness before you could. This would prevent you from becoming close to him when you eventually transferred here in the spring as a third-year student."

He hesitated before continuing. "After all, His Highness would never attempt to court the beau of his dear friend, correct? And thus it was my plan to ask for your hand and welcome you into our family. It was supposed to be a sound strategy."

"That was your plan?" Claire said. His strategy had been a failure from start to finish, but above all else, the thought of him trying to make her the future Countess Mead enraged her.

"Your lady mother was connected to the kingdom of Lindel, was she not?"

"Correct," replied Claire. "But you needn't tell me any more on that subject." At this rate, Claire thought, she could easily imagine the conversation devolving into an explanation of the destruction of Lindel. She did not want to hear the details of her mother's passing from one so close to the culprit, so she made to cut Dion off.

But Dion, in all his great hopelessness, would not be so easily halted. "I can't tell you the exact details," he said, "but my lord grandfather says that the destruction of Lindel was a necessary step for my family to regain our power.

No one has any doubt that our family is the most fit to rule the kingdom.”

Claire jumped. Her heart thundered in her chest. She could feel all the blood in her body rushing to her head, overwhelming her with a sense of anxiety so strong it pained her.

“Even if it meant tracking down and murdering a princess, the one who had escaped as a three-year-old and knew absolutely nothing?” Claire asked. Her voice came out so low it surprised even herself.

“Well,” Dion began, but Claire cut him off.

“That was my mother,” she hissed.

Dion blanched and tensed up, his earlier talkativeness giving way to despair. Yet Claire no longer paid him any mind. The words Dion and his sister had exchanged with her on the night of Vik’s ball in her past life still echoed in her mind. *Did your mother, by any chance, die young?* They had known the whole truth and yet had asked her anyway.

Claire sensed her magic pooling in her palms out of her control. *This isn’t good*, she told herself. Strong magic users such as herself could sometimes lose control over their power when racked by heavy emotions. She looked down and saw a mysterious light pouring out of her palms.

However, Dion remained oblivious and continued on his monologue as easily as if he were talking to himself. “So you even know that much? Then you must have already told His Highness about us, haven’t you? Oh, I’m already done for. Considering that your magic is so much stronger than mine, I stand no chance of disposing of you no matter what I may try to come up with. My lord grandfather, however, will think of nothing for as long as he lives aside from seizing control of the kingdom. I’ve lived my whole life as a mere pawn to help fulfill his lordship’s ambitions.”

“Does everyone in the Mead family know of what is to occur in the future?”

“I couldn’t very well tell them I’d been banished due to my failure, let alone that our family plunged into almost total ruin, no? All my family knows is that one Claire Martino must be prevented from backing the royal family at all costs. But if you’ve come from the same future as I have, then I am done for.”

Even as she restrained her intense fury at Dion as a member of the Mead family, Claire also pitied him. *Dion is someone who's spent his whole life trying to live up to the expectations of his family, isn't he?* she thought. As he slumped over in the chair with his head in his hands, Claire saw him as a mirror image of the girl she'd been before fleeing Noston.

Unconsciously, Claire began to speak. "I know someone who reminds me very much of you. Just like you, she was bound by her family name. She constantly tried to gauge what other people thought of her and considered nothing beyond how to live up to the expectations they had for her."

Hanging his head, Dion made no response.

"However," Claire continued, "when she took her first step out, she learned that she was not the center of the world. She had always been able to see as much, but she had always given up before trying to find other options. Like her, surely you must have chances to be free and live your life on your own terms. I want you to find them."

When Claire looked down, she realized that Dion's face was now raised towards hers, but his eyes grew unfocused and hollow as he listened to her story. This odd change puzzled Claire. "Whatever is the matter, Lord Dion?" she asked.

In that instant, the light abruptly returned to Dion's eyes. Now they were clear and shining with a pure transparency that made his expression only moments ago seem as if it had all been a lie.

"It is as you say, Miss Claire," said Dion. "I have been bound by my family this whole time. Perhaps I wanted for someone to come and release me from my grandfather's ensnaring spell. From now on, why, I should be able to live as a free man too, don't you think?"

Dion adopted such a clear, refreshing expression that Claire could hardly picture the saddened figure he had just been. This drastic change baffled her. *His transformation is far too unnatural*, she thought. *Even if this is a temporary ploy to fool me, I should think he could do a better job of acting than this!*

"What in the world is going on?" she murmured to herself. Then, for the first time, Claire realized that the magic that had been seeping out of her palms was

now subsiding.

Dion's appearance, coupled with the words she had just spoken, made Claire force herself to calm down and consider just where her magic had gone. *Oh yes*, she thought. *Professor Cheinz warned me not to let my magic run rampant. But with that being said—No, wait. This can't be!* She tried to discredit the possibility, but it was of no use. No matter what she attempted to come up with, there remained only one explanation for the current situation.

Claire stood up in order to put aside her troubling thoughts and scrutinized Dion's placid smile. There was no sign of the boy cowering in fright that he had been up until a few moments ago. She could see the same confidence from his previous life; however, much to her relief, there was no sense of malice nor enmity about him whatsoever.

Indeed, Claire appeared to have accidentally Mesmerized him just as Cheinz had mentioned.



Claire immediately teleported back to the palace, which she would not have done under normal circumstances, but this was a matter of urgency. She wasted no time in hurrying to Vik's office, dragging Dion along with her as she went. Although she had never once been here in her second life, no guards made to stop her anywhere along the way. For a moment, she wondered if that was thanks to her status as Asbert's honored guest, but now was not the time to worry about such things.

"Sir Lui!" she cried as she yanked open the door. "May I speak with you?"

Four pairs of eyes turned to stare at her. "Since when is this Lui's office?" Vik finally asked, looking quite put out.

"It isn't," replied Denis with an unreadable grin. "But I guess it's close enough...?"

"Welcome, Miss Claire," said Lui. She looked at Claire calmly over a mountain of documents. "May I offer you a cup of tea?"

Incidentally, despite having been on the receiving end of Claire's alarmed dragging, Dion nevertheless complied with her with that same starry-eyed smile from before.

"I apologize for bursting in like this," Claire said, faltering. "Pardon me, but...Sir Lui, I really do need to speak with you if it's at all possible."

Vik's expression turned serious as he saw how upset Claire looked. "What happened?" he asked.

"Well..." As she made to explain, Keith realized that the young man she had dragged in was none other than Earl Mead's eldest grandson and cut her off.

"This is the Mead boy, isn't he?" Keith asked. "Miss Claire is one thing, but what is *he* doing here?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, myself," said Dion. "I was speaking with Miss Claire after school when she suddenly became quite agitated. By the time I knew what was happening, we were already here."

"It appears this isn't about a matter of a curse," Vik said after a moment. He looked back and forth between Claire and Dion, she looking horribly shaken up

and he wonderfully placid and relaxed. Vik judged that something had happened which warranted assistance, but it was also readily apparent that Dion was in no state to cause anyone harm.

“Did you not want to talk to me anymore?” Vik asked.

“Of course I still do,” Claire responded quickly, “but this is a separate issue.”

Her frantic attempt to convey that she wanted to speak with Vik as well caused some of the tension to drain from his face. “I was joking,” he told her. “If you need to consult with Lui, you may use the adjoining parlor. Lui, I leave her in your able hands.”

“As you command,” Lui said.

Lui, Claire, and Dion moved to the parlor. After bidding Dion to sit down next to her, Claire explained all of what had just transpired: what Dion had said and how it made her magic run wild, his curious appearance afterwards, and her suspicion that her words had affected him somehow.

Once the story was complete, Lui said, “I see,” and turned to face Dion sitting diagonally across from her. “May I see your hands for a moment?”

“But of course.” Dion acquiesced readily and gave both hands to Lui.

As she watched this exchange, Claire hurried to whisper to Lui, “Sir Lui, your ward!”

“I’ve already cast one upon myself, so you needn’t fret. At any rate, I believe that...there’s no need for a ward anyway. Isn’t that right?”

Lui posed this last question to Dion, not Claire. Something in his eyes seemed to confirm her hypothesis.

“Yes,” Dion said. “Please do not be concerned.”

“Then let’s begin.”

Lui closed her eyes and took Dion’s hands. She carefully studied the flow of magic through his palms and said after a few seconds, “Yes, I understand now.” Her eyes snapped open, and she smoothly released his hands.

“Based on your account, Miss Claire,” Lui continued, “you are concerned that

you have used your magic to place him under your control, are you not?"

"Yes," said Claire.

"It is as you supposed. Furthermore, I do not believe this is brainwashing. You have Mesmerized him."

"I-I have?" she cried.

"Indeed, you have. And quite skillfully at that. There are barely any issues with it at all." Through her panic, Claire realized—much to her confusion—that Lui was complimenting her.

"My goodness," said Dion. "I've been Mesmerized by Miss Claire, have I? It's not half bad either."

Dion should have been angry, and yet he did not look bothered in the slightest. He merely continued to smile away sedately, as if he didn't have the faintest idea what was going on.

But this is nothing to smile about, Claire thought. "Pardon me!" she cried. "Sir Lui, considering your ability, you *can* break the spell, can't you?"

"I cannot; it is impossible. If it were merely brainwashing, we could find someone with the appropriate training or else take him to a holy woman to be cured, but Mesmerizing is more fundamental. I am, of course, familiar with Mesmerizing, but this is my first time seeing someone who has actually been Mesmerized," Lui answered, sounding almost amused. Her smile was reserved, but she clearly found this whole situation entertaining.

"Oh no," Claire said. "This can't be."

"Mesmerizing can only occur if one strongly empathizes with the other person or else strongly envies their circumstances. I suppose this case is a combination of multiple factors."

"I would agree," said Dion, sounding as detached as ever. "At that moment, I was indeed thinking that I'd like to live a life like Miss Claire's. My lord grandfather had been like a god to me, but when I had that thought, I felt like that image of him collapsed within an instant." He made an exaggerated collapsing gesture with his hands.

“Then how can we ever return him to normal?” Claire asked. While Dion and Lui discussed the situation as casually as if they were trying to determine what to have for lunch, Claire, on the other hand, turned pale.

“That would be next to impossible,” Lui said.

“Yes,” Dion added, “but I don’t particularly mind staying like this. Mentally speaking, I feel as if some sort of weight has been lifted off of my shoulders. It’s been quite a long time since I’ve felt this good.”

“No!” Claire cried in dismay. Unable to stop her hands from trembling, she forced them into tight fists as Lui and Dion smiled good-naturedly at one another. The concept of unintentionally changing someone’s mind at a fundamental level was a terrifying thing.

“At any rate,” Lui said, “I find it rather fascinating that the heir to the title of Earl Mead should possess enough jealousy to be so easily Mesmerized. May I call in my lord prince?”

“But of course,” said Dion. “I’ll tell him whatever he wishes to know.” All traces of the former young heir of House Mead were gone.

When Lui returned to the main room to fetch Vik and the others, Dion whispered to Claire, “Say, why is it that you aren’t as close to His Highness and Sir Lui as you used to be? Was I only imagining it, or weren’t you good friends?”

“Well,” she began, “to be honest, I haven’t told anyone here that this is my second life.”

“Really now?” he cried. “But I’m sure that His Highness would believe you if you explained it to him.”

Hearing such a genuine, supportive comment from Dion made Claire feel wonderfully relieved. Now that she thought about it, she remembered that it had been her plan from the start to explain to someone that she’d chosen to redo everything.

“I think so too,” she said. “But would you please let me choose the best time in which to reveal it to him?”

“Very well, Miss Claire.” Dion smiled at her kindly just as Vik walked in,

retainers in tow.

“Well, let’s hear it, then,” Vik said as he sat down on the sofa and crossed his arms. The perceptive look he leveled at Dion made it hard for Claire to picture him as the young man making quips only a few moments before.

“I will answer anything you ask of me, Your Highness,” Dion swore. As always, he responded with the same agreeable smile. *Just now*, Claire thought, *Dion said he would say anything, but how can he manage that without revealing this is our second life?*

Vik chuckled. “Will you now?” Dion’s behavior was much too carefree and cheerful for the eldest son of the Mead family, the star of many dark rumors and holder of many unnatural privileges. Lui had briefly filled Vik in before he had come into the room, but all the same, the sight of Dion made Vik’s slightly bewildered expression collapse into a grin.

“The story Miss Claire told us a few minutes ago is as follows. The two of you were discussing your families, whereupon Miss Claire’s magic ran wild, with the result that, in response to some part of your conversation, Dion was Mesmerized,” Lui explained.

“Yes, indeed,” said Dion.

Vik fired a question at Dion immediately after the boy had confirmed Lui’s statement. “What was said in this conversation that related to your families?”

“As Your Highness can imagine, truly dreadful things—my family’s desire to retake the throne and other such unsavory topics.” As promised, Dion made no move at all to conceal the Mead family’s wickedness. Additionally, as Claire had asked, he purposefully obfuscated the core of the conversation. As strange as Dion appeared right now, Claire realized that he was on her side.

Dion continued. “I do not speak of ambitions unlikely to ever bear fruit, but rather something that the present earl and the earl before him are actively working towards. I transferred into this Academy under the orders of my lord grandfather to perform reconnaissance on the state of Wurtz. However, Miss Claire unexpectedly discovered said fact. Then, while we were discussing various aspects of our familial circumstances, she unintentionally Mesmerized me.”

Vik and the knights were silent. There was such a peculiar discrepancy between the contents of Dion's story and the casual manner in which he told it that an awkward tension descended on the parlor.

Dion added, while still smiling that dazzling smile resulting from his Mesmerizing, "Miss Claire truly is an admirable person. She is my goddess, for this day has changed me."

"Uh...huh," said Vik.

Annoyed that even Vik could not dispel this awkward tension, Keith lost his temper and rounded on Dion. "When you talked about performing reconnaissance on the state of Wurtz, you meant scoping out the area around the prince and determining his usual timetable, yes? Even if your attempt failed, the plan alone is a serious crime. Do you not understand this?"

"You are absolutely correct, Sir Keith. Thus, I will happily accept any punishment the royal family sees fit to bestow upon me, save for execution. Yes, execution is the one exception." He paused for a moment before admitting, in an emotionally charged voice far removed from the dreamy manner that had thus far accompanied his speech, "I'd like to live free like Miss Claire."

"When was this plan of yours to be carried out?" Keith asked.

"Within a year's time. However, given that I have completely failed in my responsibilities, my family may take action at once."

"I understand the situation now," said Vik. Continuing in the same tone of voice, he added, "Lui, explain to me in detail the state of this spell he is under."

"Considering that his unconscious mind is now acting in accordance with Claire's, the spell is considerably complicated and strong. Given that, I suppose you might say his will is all but overwritten by hers. If you are concerned, we could have a holy woman examine him, but I don't imagine her estimation of his prognosis would be any different than mine."

Vik took a moment to respond. "Then it is as my teacher at the Academy said. Knowing that news of this might leak out, I think our best course of action would indeed be to take him to a holy woman."

Impatiently, Keith butted in and said, “Then Your Highness, what of reporting this to His Majesty?”

“You needn’t do so now. Judging by the situation, before long I will need to report to him myself. Do I make myself clear, Keith?”

Keith relented as Vik’s stern eyes turned on him and demanded an answer. “As you command.”

Then Vik’s gaze fell on Claire; it was now her turn. “As for you, Miss Claire,” he began, “you have stated that you had an excellent magic teacher. To what extent are you able to protect yourself?”

“I have wards,” Claire said. “I also have teleportation magic for the purposes of running away. Therefore, I will be all right.”

“I do not find it hard to imagine that you walked into this situation, despite knowing what you did about the Meads, because of this level of self-protection you have. I am not condemning you for this in and of itself. But do not be so reckless.”

His voice was gentle enough, but Vik’s words made apparent that his simple concern for her was mixed with Paffuto’s official stance to protect its honored Nostonian guest from any harm. *Oh, what sort of mess have I made now?* she wondered. “My apologies, Your Highness.” She bowed in regret of her foolish actions.

Vik hesitated a moment before saying, “Well, in terms of the outcome, you certainly did us a great deed.”

“On that note,” Dion added, beaming benevolently at all in attendance, “what should I do for the time being? If I won’t be imprisoned while we wait and see how the situation develops, is there any job I could do for you, Your Highness?”

The soft gaze Vik had given to Claire turned steely once more as he looked back at Dion. “Yes,” he said. “Of course there is.”

From that day forward, Dion began to live in a guest room in the royal palace. Truthfully, he really ought to have tried securing definitive proof of the Meads’ sinister plots, but Dion’s cheerful and benevolent behavior was so out of

character for him that any plans to the effect were soon scrapped. Should the Meads find out that their whole scheme had been revealed, it was possible that they might choose to attempt a last desperate coup. Thus, the present plan was to monitor the situation as it evolved. However, it would be challenging to hide for long that Dion had now sided with Claire. Therefore, the group moved to convene in Dion's room for a strategy meeting as soon as possible.

That night after dinner, once it was already pitch black outside, Claire, Vik, and all the rest sat on sofas in Dion's spacious parlor, sipping tea and nibbling on refreshments. Alcoholic beverages would typically be part of the drink lineup for such an event, but tonight there were none.

It has been so long since I've been able to take my time and talk with the others, Claire thought. Even as she knew this wasn't the appropriate time to reminisce, she beheld the faces of all her old friends from where she was seated.

"Well," Denis suggested, "how about we make it look like Earl Mead's plan is moving along as it should and act like Dion's successfully cozied up to Vik at the Academy?"

Keith agreed with Denis's proposal. "Uh-huh. Presently, the only evidence we have that the Mead family intends to commit treason is Dion's own testimony. If we act now without any definitive proof, we'll have nothing to do in the event that anyone claims his words were lies. By the way, I apologize for being so heated earlier." He bowed to Vik.

Vik pondered the idea for a moment before muttering, "No. Frankly speaking, I am a little lost... However..."

"As His Highness fears," Dion cut in smoothly, guessing what Vik meant even as the prince fumbled for words, "I believe my lord grandfather would have no qualms disposing of me in that event. I'd hate to lose my life in such a manner."

Claire looked down into her cup. That she was projecting her own circumstances onto him was a given, but she still couldn't quite believe that Dion's newfound cheer was solely due to the Mesmerizing. *Perhaps he was always a cheerful sort,* she thought. *Given the expectations of his family and the role he was compelled to play, I wonder how many times that has conflicted*

with his personality.

“Anyway, what was it this morning that you mentioned wanting to consult with me about, Miss Claire?” Vik asked.

Caught completely off guard, Claire’s shoulders twitched. Vik’s question had immediately dove into the heart of the matter. “Oh, no, pardon me,” she said.

“Do you not trust me enough to say?”

“No, that’s not the case at all,” she insisted. She faltered, unsure of where to begin her explanation. That her mother was a descendant of the royal family of Old Lindel? That Claire had traveled back in time in order to redo the past? Then there was her fundamental concern that if she told the whole truth, he wouldn’t believe all of it. However, everyone present had already guessed that something Dion had touched on today after school had made her so angry that she’d lost control of her magic power.

Lui said, “Although I cannot speak for Miss Claire, I know I’ve had a sense of familiarity with her since the moment we met. Miss, would you be willing to act as if we are close friends today?”

Claire blinked. “Close friends?” she repeated.

“Yes.” Suddenly, Lui’s speech grew more informal. “I’m sure it must be hard to talk to the prince of a foreign land and his retainers, but if we were your friends, couldn’t you trust us then? How about it?”

The familiarity of it filled Claire’s heart with a warm feeling.

“That sounds great to me!” Denis cried. “You should just call me Denis. Not temporarily, but from now on. Because we’re friends, Miss Claire!”

“Likewise,” Lui said, “let me be Lui to you from now on.”

“So on that note,” said Keith, “why not call me Keith as well?”

Vik looked on, pleased, as each of his retainers spoke in turn before finally adding, “There you have it, Claire. Now will you talk to us?”

Claire had once thought he might never again address her by only her name. Holding back a snuffle, she nodded.

“My mother was a descendant of the royal family of Old Lindel,” she explained. “A margrave from Paffuto attacked the country when she was still a small child, but she was somehow taken to safety and thus survived the attack. However, the Meads had her murdered when I was five years old. Talking about this is what made my magic run wild during my conversation with Lord Dion earlier today.”

“Hold on,” Vik said. He raised a hand in agitation. “There’s a lot here I want to dive deeper into, but first let’s start with the fact that what you just said is all considered a state secret. How did you come to know this?”

Claire shot a glance at Dion. Midway through snacking on a sandwich, he gave her a friendly smile and nodded his approval before she responded. “I’m not sure how best to begin this,” she said. “First, please let me clear up my most major point of personal curiosity. Lord Dion, you do know about Prince Oswald, don’t you?”

This was a simple question that any citizen of Paffuto could have answered. Vik and the knights looked at her in utter confusion. However, Dion seemed to understand the gist of her query and said, “Yes, of course. How much would you like me to explain?”

“Everything you know.”

“Will do.”

Keith butted in and asked, “What do you mean by bringing Prince Oswald into this, Claire?”

“Let her be,” said Vik. “Let’s continue.” He appeared to have realized from listening to Claire and Dion’s small back-and-forth that the Mead plot could in some way involve his brother.

“Let me begin with how it happened the first time around,” said Dion. “The whole matter was done in secret, but I still heard talk that Prince Oswald attempted to poison Prince Vik. Honestly, it was quite a sloppy plan, so it quickly failed. This all took place about a half year or so before you came to Paffuto, Claire. At the same time, the Marquis Rioux’s family who supported Prince Oswald likewise descended into ruin.”

Dion delivered this information smoothly and all in one breath. The moment he finished, Keith grabbed his own head. “Hold on,” he said. “What in the world are you talking about? None of that made a bit of sense from beginning to end!”

“Yeah,” said Denis, uncharacteristically bewildered. “I didn’t follow at all. To begin with, Prince Oswald’s never tried to poison Vik. If it had happened, I’m pretty sure we’d be the ones to know, don’t you think?”

Claire, too, was baffled. “I can’t believe that happened,” she said.

“But it’s possible that the plans are being laid for this to happen later,” Lui said, unintentionally affirming Dion. “The poison element lends it an oddly realistic feel.”

Claire felt the world darken before her eyes. *I knew that such a thing happening wasn’t impossible*, she thought, *but I never truly believed that Vik could be attacked like this*. The Vik she knew was always propelled by great confidence and overflowing with kindness. His seriousness and discernment only added to his overall aura. What if all these fine qualities stemmed from the harsh fate of growing up with unavoidable responsibility as heir to the throne? The thought of it made her feel like she was about to collapse under the weight of an emotion she could not put into words.

“Are you all right?” Vik asked. “Your face is pale.”

A soft, familiar scent floated over to her. Claire, whose gaze had fallen without her notice, lifted her head. Vik had just draped his jacket over her shoulders, and she rushed to convey her gratitude. “Thank you,” she said. “I’m all right.”

“Today’s been quite an eventful day for you, hasn’t it?” he said. “You don’t have to force yourself. We’ll have more chances to talk later. Lui, could you take her back to the detached palace?”

“Wait,” Claire said. “What Lord Dion mentioned is something that has not yet come to pass.”

“What do you mean?”

After hesitating for a brief moment, Claire began to speak. “I believe that

what Lord Dion spoke of just now will occur later on. For you see, he and I know the future. I come from a world one year hereafter, and I brought Lord Dion back in time with me.”

Bewildered, Lui asked, “Claire?” but Claire spoke over her and continued.

“It is all right if you don’t believe me yet. However, I know many things that you have yet to tell me.” In order to make them believe that she truly was on her second life, Claire saw no other option apart from telling them this. While the many memories of their time spent as friends remained only with her, the thought of using them in order to protect Vik filled her with happiness.

“Lui,” she said, “you appear calm and collected on the outside, but deep down you are truly a passionate, very strong, and wonderfully kind person. You always drink your tea straight, and you often say that Vik is like a little brother to you. You once told me that you were scouted to be a guard when you were practicing swordplay with your brother.”

Lui’s pupils shook in surprise. It was a natural reaction, Claire supposed. There was no way Claire could have known any of this yet in her second life. “I like it when you’re all anxious before an important mission,” Claire continued. “Whenever I’d see you like that, I felt like I wanted to protect you.”

Lui was silent. At first, she had looked as if she wanted to speak, but as Claire continued, Lui became lost in thought.

“Miss Claire,” said Denis. “What about me?” He had been baffled at the start as he listened to Claire, but as she correctly recounted Lui’s backstory, he seemed to have decided that Claire was telling the truth. Now he spoke to Claire in a slightly playful tone of voice to lighten the situation, but his eyes were serious.

“You’re always surrounded by girls and out partying, but you’re actually quite bright and even graduated as the top of your class at the Royal Academy,” Claire said. “That made Lui terribly frustrated in my past life. Also, you can be very considerate. When we all go out drinking, you barely drink anything yourself. I feel like you’re always eating nuts.”

Denis took a moment to process that. “I think that Miss Claire just gave me an enormous compliment,” he said, “but is it accurate?”

“Absolutely,” Lui answered.

Grinning at this little interaction, Claire next turned to Keith. “Keith,” she said, “whenever anything goes awry, you’re always the first to come to anyone’s defense. I’ve been told that you have an absolutely frightening older sister. Well, the Vik and Denis in my past life told me, but the thought of you being so strong and kind but still terrified of your sister struck me as so funny that I couldn’t help but laugh. I never ended up being able to meet her, but I’d like to this time around.”

“You know about my sister?” Keith muttered as, behind him, Vik and Denis pulled guilty expressions.

This simple, everyday manner of conversation felt so familiar. In her second life, the only connection she had to Vik was through school, and as she had spent virtually no time with any of his retainers, her knowledge came as a definite surprise to all of them.

“Claire,” Lui said. “What magic did you use to...go back in time? I’ve never heard of such a spell.”

As Claire tried to answer, her mind became strangely hazy. She could remember how it had worked, but she could not clearly put it into words. *That other world must be real, she thought, but it all felt like a dream. And this is also...a...game world? I can’t possibly say that.*

“A very tragic event happened,” she explained. “I wanted to go to the past and redo everything, and somehow, just as I ran out of magic, I found myself back at the root of that event. Because Lord Dion and I share magic, he was brought along with me.”

Vik and the knights gasped, and their eyes turned to Dion as one.

“Oh, for you see,” Dion explained, “I was quite a nasty individual before Miss Claire Mesmerized me. In my first life, I tried to cast a curse on her in order to weaken her magic, but she had no trouble reflecting it back on me.”

“Whoa,” said Denis.

Vik looked back and forth from Dion’s carefree expression to Denis’s look of dismay. Then he asked, “Claire, are you that powerful of a magic user?”

“Baptisms should occur at a church in the homeland of one’s mother, correct?” Claire asked. “My mother passed away before she could tell me that she was a member of the Old Lindel royal family, which meant that when I was baptized in Noston, I did not receive my true magical color. You happened to come across me on Lindel Island just after I completed my true baptism.”

“Then why did you claim that your sister was so superior to you?”

“As that is what those in Noston think, I thought it would be fine to say.” Claire almost blurted out that it was because she had wanted to remain free of societal expectations, but she caught herself in time and changed the subject.

“I myself don’t know what color my magic is,” she admitted. “Lui happened to be there at my baptism in my first life, and she said it was a color that she’d never seen before.”

“More than that,” said Lui. Out of everyone still befuddled, she alone accepted what was going on. “Yours is a color that has never yet existed in the world. I imagine that must be why the Meads were working to fill in the holy spring on Lindel Island: to stop Claire from being baptized.”

“But what does Claire’s magic, given that she originated from Noston, have to do with the Meads’ ambition?” Vik asked.

“Well,” Dion began before he trailed off, at a loss.

Claire stepped in and said, “That is because in the future I protected the royal family as a mage of the kingdom of Paffuto.” She knew perfectly well that account differed from the truth, but she could see no other possible explanation. She couldn’t very well tell Vik that she had been engaged to him.

“I see,” said Vik. “So does this mean that you coming here to study abroad will lead to that future?”

“No,” answered Claire. “I did not come here as a student in my first life. In fact, I fled the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy once it became clear that there was no place for me back home. Along the way, I met all of you in the town of Iias and was invited to come with you to Paffuto. This would have occurred about half a year from the present day. At any rate, I came to study at the Royal Academy at the request of Your Highness.”

“Got it,” said Vik. “Now I’d like to move on to your question about knowing Prince Oswald. That means that in half a year from now, as you know it, my brother is gone.”

Claire hesitated before nodding. The room, relatively calm before, now grew deathly quiet. However, neither Keith, Lui, Denis, nor Vik looked especially upset.

Vik said, “That’s all right. It’s a common enough thing to happen.” In those simple words, Claire felt the weight of the responsibility carried by an heir to the throne. All she could do was nod.

Keith now spoke up. “If we put Claire’s and Dion’s stories together, we can see that the Meads, Prince Oswald, and the Riouxes have been conspiring together to seize power in Paffuto for quite some time. Is it apt to say that they consider you, Claire, to be an obstacle in that?”

“Not exactly,” Dion said. “You’re a bit mistaken, Sir Keith. In my first life, I believe my family, the Riouxes, and His Highness Prince Oswald all made separate attempts for the throne. However, I wasn’t fully aware of any of this at the time, so I can’t say for certain. Still, if all three of them conspire together now, I think the plan would be quite different and could pose a real threat.”

“I see now,” said Keith, aiming a stern look at his lord. “Vik, this really must be reported to His Majesty. This matter goes far beyond anything we can condone.”

Vik sighed. “Unfortunately, I agree with you. I’ll deliver the news to the king now.”

In the office of Noston’s Crown Prince Asbert, Salomon asked, “Your Highness, what should be done with these documents?”

“Ah, I’ll start on them once I’ve finished up with these,” Asbert answered.

Charlotte, newly installed in the fiancée’s seat, idled on a sofa at the end of the room and watched Asbert and his retainers toil away. In front of her sat a cup of tea and a plate of cookies for one. Of the cookies, only coconut remained untouched, for Charlotte detested coconut. Cold tea and her least favorite

snack—what a perfect representation of boredom! *And I'm only here because he invited me for tea!* she thought indignantly. *Not only did we take tea in his office, of all places, but within ten minutes he went right back to work! Talk about boring!*

Asbert typically lived in the Academy dorms alongside all of the other students, and as he only returned to the palace on school holidays, his official duties and paperwork kept him quite busy indeed. However, even when already occupied in this manner, Asbert sent frequent letters to Charlotte, just as Claire had asked, and kept Charlotte nearby whenever they were at school. He had even invited her here today in a similar fashion for tea. Sadly, Asbert appeared to have misjudged exactly what Claire had meant by “if time allowed.”

Picking up her teacup, its contents now having thoroughly gone cold, Charlotte heaved a sigh. *Prince Asbert is happy to be engaged to me*, she thought. *Isn't he?*

Noticing Charlotte looking in his direction, Asbert asked, “Would you like a fresh cup of tea?”

Charlotte hurried to hide her disgruntled expression and gave him a light, charming smile. “Yes, thank you. This tea is truly delicious.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Claire told me about this particular type of tea once before. She said it was perfect for her darling little sister.”

“Oh, Claire,” Charlotte gushed. *Not Claire again!* she added to herself. Inwardly, she was not amused. Everything—the frequent letters, the tea he had prepared for her—all came back to Claire. First it had started with, “Aren’t you lonely without Claire around?” and then it continued with, “Have you heard from Claire?” and, “I’d love to make a present to you of this stationery. It has a picture of Claire’s favorite flower on it,” leading to today’s, “Claire told me about this tea.” *I never imagined that Claire would be gone before I started on Asbert’s route!* she thought. *Also, why is he treating me so poorly even though I’m his fiancée? You call this a tea party? If he wasn’t the guy I’m going after right now, he’s so unobservant that I’d turn him down in a flash!*

Yet Charlotte also had an additional gripe—the teacher whom Claire had tasked her with. Charlotte’s teacher was her Aunt Anne, Benjamin’s younger

sister who worked in the palace's chapel as a holy woman. With her cheerful, sunny attitude, many people were drawn to Anne in a way that reminded Charlotte exactly of Claire. To make matters even worse, Anne's magic was the same color that Charlotte planned to receive. Having been in the audience at Claire's baptism and witnessed everyone else's sudden changes in behavior firsthand, Charlotte did not want to be treated as Anne's equal.

I wouldn't mind if all she did was lead a quiet life in the church, Charlotte thought. But when she tries to teach me how to be the queen consort, all she does is get in my way forever! Besides, I always thought she was nice, but when it comes to my lessons, she's so strict! She runs me ragged week after week and even gives me homework. At this rate, I won't be able to enjoy everyone flattering me as Asbert's fiancée at the Academy!

"Oh, this is such a bore," Charlotte mumbled to herself, so quietly that Asbert could not hear. Reality was surprisingly much more serious than the rose-tinted vision she'd had of being a crown prince's fiancée.

Entirely unconcerned for how she might look to anyone else, Charlotte sprawled out all across the sofa in Asbert's parlor.

After the boring tea party wrapped up and Charlotte went home, Oscar came to Asbert's office.

"Your Highness," he said, "I've come to ask for your royal assent on this document."

"Yes, let me see," said Asbert. "Say, has she contacted you recently?"

Oscar raised one eyebrow in profound confusion. "Who is this person you speak of, Your Highness?"

Asbert quickly responded. "Your younger sister, Miss Claire. She spent the summer holidays in Paffuto without returning home to see your family, did she not? As her older brother, are you not worried for her? And for how she is being treated over there? Do you think she's having any troubles? When is she ever coming home?"

"Claire has said that she will not return to Noston until she graduates from

the Royal Academy of Paffuto. She is aware herself of all the myriad complex circumstances surrounding her, you see.”

Oscar’s eyes alighted on a teacup left at the edge of the room. Asbert caught the direction of his gaze and sighed. “Yes, well, there is that,” said Asbert.

“However, my sister is hardworking by nature, and I’m sure her efforts will pay off,” Oscar said. “According to her letters, she’s become quite close to the Crown Prince of Paffuto, His Highness Vik.” He paused before continuing. “I am sure that she is acting in Noston’s best interests.”

“She is growing close to Prince Vik, is she?” Asbert asked. “I’ve heard many good things about him.”

“She has also received a suite of large rooms in the Paffish royal palace, just as you had requested. I must express my gratitude for all the consideration you’ve shown her.”

After a brisk bow, Oscar left the office. Once he was gone, Asbert said listlessly, “Salomon.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Salomon responded.

“I was thinking that once she had calmed down from this ordeal, I might send her that stationery with the flowers she said she liked. What I gave to Charlotte the other day was only the leftover amount. Bring the rest to me.”

“Your Highness,” Salomon said, “to deliver a gift of stationery sends the implication that you are pressing her for a letter. That would be most improper for your former fiancée. It is likewise improper to mention that Miss Charlotte’s gift was merely an afterthought.”

Salomon’s opinion made perfect sense.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.” Asbert’s shoulders slumped.

Salomon spoke up again. “Miss Claire appears to be entirely focused on moving on. I think it best if you treasure Miss Charlotte, Your Highness.”

“I’m doing exactly what Claire told me to,” Asbert sighed.

Will she ever return to the kingdom one day? he wondered. Idly, he stared at the stationery with its image of the beautiful flowers.



During the first week after Claire had Mesmerized Dion, the two of them, Vik, and the knights gathered nightly in Dion's parlor.

"So no one apart from Dion knows that Claire is on her second life?" Vik asked.

"Yes, that appears to be the case," said Dion. He'd paused in chewing on a fluffy cupcake in order to answer Vik's question. As simpleminded as he acted, he still treated Vik with the proper respect. "I only became aware of this myself the moment Claire Mesmerized me. And to begin with, only my family was aware of my plan to transfer into the Wurtz Academy and befriend Your Highness before Claire arrived. For you see, while we were indeed colluding with His Highness Prince Oswald and the Rioux family, we had various designs to wait and see what would happen later."

It was quite a heavy topic, but Dion answered so nonchalantly that the whole conversation maintained a neutral, pleasant tone. Claire, too, found herself enjoying these evenings even through her own tenseness.

"That being said," Lui remarked with a wry grin, "it appears the curse maker of House Mead has quite the sweet tooth."

Dion tilted his head thoughtfully. "I've always liked desserts since I was a child, but somewhere along the way I stopped eating them. But food tastes better now that Miss Claire was kind enough to Mesmerize me."

Denis snorted. "What a way to put it."

Laughter rang throughout the room again at Denis's dry remark.

Claire, Dion, and Vik had ended up within the same class at school. Vik and Dion spent much of their time together in order to produce the illusion that Dion's stratagem had worked. For his part, Dion never spoke to Claire at school in order to avoid drawing the Mead family's attention towards her.

"Do the Meads really believe I still live in Noston?" she asked. "I've received much better treatment here in Paffuto than I could hope to afford given my station, but I fear that they'd interpret this in a bad way."

“Oh, yes,” said Dion. “We Meads are detested by the royal family, you see. We have no frequent visitors, and all the other nobles keep us at arm’s length. I doubt the rest of my family would learn of some trivial piece of news like a schoolgirl coming from abroad to live in the palace. Truthfully, I was also supposed to serve as a spy, but now I’ve had a change of heart. So I think you can rest easy, provided that neither Prince Oswald nor the Riouxes become interested in you, Miss Claire.”

Vik nodded. “I see. The royal family keeps its distance from the Meads too.”

“Well, it was our plan to get ahead of the others and lay claim to Miss Claire while we could. We spoke of her as someone with substandard magical powers. Still, we thought that if we waited too long, she could become a threat to us, Your Highness.” Dion capped off his explanation with the formality for Vik’s benefit.

The curtains were open, yet it was already quite dark outside. Far across the wide castle grounds, Claire could see the lights down in the surrounding town. *Sophie will begin to worry about me before long, she thought. I’d best be returning to the detached palace soon.*

Judging that now was a good time to pause the conversation, Claire rose from her seat. “It’s getting quite late,” she explained, “so I will retire for the night.”

Lui made to get up too, as Vik typically ordered her to escort Claire back to her rooms. However, this time Vik stopped her.

“No, not tonight,” he said.

“Very well,” said Lui. She promptly stepped back and said nothing more.

The awkwardness of the situation and the momentary silence made Claire feel uneasy, but she had no particular reason to be concerned. She said, “Yes, I will be fine. I can return to my rooms on my own.”

“No, that isn’t what I meant.”

Claire looked at him in confusion.

“I’ll walk you back,” Vik clarified.

“Oh, that’s—” Claire began. As Vik rose smoothly to his feet, she understood

why he had dismissed Lui. She could not meet his gaze.

“Let’s go,” Vik said.

“Gooood night, Miss Claire!” Denis called with a merry wave of his hand.

As her friends smiled warmly at her, Claire called back to them, “G-Good night, everyone,” and left the room.

Vik chose the formal route through the fanciful corridors of the palace to escort Claire back to her rooms, rather than the shortcut that ran through the back garden. The group’s conversation had stretched long into the night, making it quite late. As they descended to the first floor, Claire could no longer see the bright lights of the town that she’d noticed from Dion’s window. Although they had been chatting quite freely earlier, for some reason their conversation now died out. The only sound echoing in the halls was the measured tapping of their footsteps against the marble floor. In the midst of the odd hush on that autumn night, soft lantern light beautifully illuminated the corridor here and there.

Vik walked just ahead of Claire. She would have preferred to walk abreast of him, but she wasn’t sure how he would take that. *He and I used to walk like that many times before*, she thought.

In her first life, Vik had shown attraction to her right from the start. It had puzzled her yet, at the same time, thrilled her. Claire had been drawn to Vik even while fully aware of the differences in their respective stations. *I will be satisfied even if we can just be friends, as my goal is to have peace between both Noston and Paffuto. I mustn’t ask for any more indulgences beyond that.*

Vik suddenly turned back to look at her with gentle, kind eyes and remarked, “You’re awfully quiet tonight.”

She realized she’d naturally know the color of those eyes anywhere. “As are you, Your Highness,” Claire pointed out.

“By the way,” Vik asked, “how come you only refer to me by my title? You never call the knights ‘sir’ anymore. Aren’t we friends?”

“In a sense, yes...but I am only a student from abroad that you’ve been kind

enough to treat so nicely.”

From the day she had Mesmerized Dion, Claire had indeed considered Vik to be a friend. Ever since then, she had dispensed with all formalities for the knights, but for some reason, she could not bring herself to call Vik by his name.

“You see,” she began, but before she could go further, Vik pulled her into the shadow of a pillar. She gasped internally as the familiar scent of his cologne assailed her. But something was wrong.

“Your Highness?” she asked.

Vik did not answer her, only held a finger to his lips and peered off into the darkness a short distance away. Silently, Claire followed his gaze and found Prince Oswald and the tall man she’d seen conversing with him before.

“My lord brother and Marquis Rioux,” he whispered.

“So that’s the marquis who is plotting with Prince Oswald and the Meads?” Claire whispered back. “I saw them talking once before in a secluded area.”

“Well, based on what Dion says, that’s no wonder.”

His whispering voice was the same as it ever was, but Claire realized that Vik was standing extremely close to her. His eyes seemed to darken for a moment, and she swore it was not just her imagination.

“Even considering that Dion hasn’t passed the news about me along to the Meads,” Claire whispered, “I don’t especially want them to notice me.”

“Then should we head back now?”

Claire shook her head and took Vik by the hand. Vik began to say, “Pardon?” in his shock, but in the very next instant, he found himself already standing in Claire’s room.

“Claire,” he breathed. “You really can teleport like it’s nothing.” Vik’s eyes widened as he stared at her, his hand still in hers.

“Yes,” she said. “I still have not used it much, but I have studied it with all my might. Therefore, do feel free to depend on me if the situation ever calls for it.”

“It’s as Dion said. Still, personally speaking, I can’t say that I would feel good

taking you up on the offer.” He paused before adding, “I’d rather protect you myself.”

Claire giggled. “That’s no surprise at all.”

For a moment, Vik seemed surprised to see her laugh, but then he exhaled slowly and smiled back at her. “I was actually hoping to talk with you for a bit tonight,” he said.

“Oh?”

“I figured I’d have the chance to talk with you more if I escorted you back to the detached palace, but as it turns out, we’re already here.” He ran a hand through his hair and made an odd face, both bashful and frustrated.

The honesty of his expression left Claire at a loss for words. *If Vik goes back the way we came, then he’ll be sure to stumble across Prince Oswald and the Marquis having their secret discussion, she thought. But there is a shortcut that passes straight through the courtyard. Vik can return to Dion’s parlor without using that corridor. I must be careful not to cause a misunderstanding, but...*

Suddenly, an image of Vik from when he’d come to see her in the Reine mansion, where she used to work as a governess in her first life, flashed through her mind. He had only ever stayed long enough for a cup of tea, but they’d had such fun talking about silly, trivial things. At the time, she had failed to notice herself falling in love with him, but she had spent her days in anticipation of his knock upon her windowpane.

She knew she must bid him farewell, and quickly, but the words “good night” refused to leave her mouth.

Vik summoned the courage to speak up first. “Might I have a cup of tea?” he asked.

Claire started. “But of course.”

After she finished bidding Sophie a good night in the room across the entranceway, Claire quietly brewed a pot of tea. Vik sat on the sofa, somewhat restless, his eyes following her as she worked. In her second life, Claire had thus far only ever seen him act the part of the nobleman, so she smiled to see this

familiar side of Vik once more.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “I was only...feeling nostalgic.”

“Nostalgic? Interesting.”

“Yes.”

They lapsed into another, not quite awkward, silence. However, still unwilling to part, they both sipped their tea as slowly as they could.

“Do you keep in touch with your sister?” Vik asked.

“She tends to send me one letter in response to every three or so that I send her. Her lessons to become the queen consort seem to be keeping her busy, so she doesn’t respond much.”

“I’m sorry to phrase it like this, but...didn’t your sister basically steal your place? You needn’t be so sympathetic towards her.”

Claire’s gaze fell to the teacup in her hand. True, if she took a step backwards and looked at the situation objectively, perhaps she was only acting as Charlotte’s obedient big sister. However, Claire was here now precisely because she wanted to be.

“As I believe I’ve mentioned before,” she said, “I’m no saint myself.”

Vik chuckled wryly in a way that seemed almost sad. “Honestly, you’re stubborn about some of the strangest things.”

The twin figures of Marquis Rioux and Oswald as she had seen them only minutes before flashed through Claire’s mind. A slight desire to be Vik’s emotional support fluttered to life in her heart. Impulsively, she set her teacup on the table and straightened up, rallying herself.

“I have no right to intrude in Your Highness’s personal feelings. However, as your friend, I am here to listen to anything you have to say. Just like how you listened to me earlier, yes?”

“You’d listen?” Vik said. “Thank you.”

His face didn’t move. *I suppose he can’t talk to me after all*, Claire thought.

Yet just as Claire's heart began to sink, frustrated by her own inability, Vik said, "I was about eight years old the first time I met my brother. I thought he seemed like a quiet person, unlike Keith."

Claire raised her head. "Oh... His Highness Prince Oswald is the same age as Keith, isn't he?"

"Yes. I knew I had an older brother from a different mother. However, complex circumstances prevented us from meeting prior to then. At the time, I understood what was going on, but I was still looking forward to having a brother."

From then on, Vik relayed to Claire a tale of his past which she hadn't known of in her first life. "Oswald grew up in town before he came to live at the royal palace. Yet even though they called him back to the palace, I was declared the next in line for the throne after my father. However, it was obvious to me what everyone around us intended by this." Vik paused before continuing. "I knew they wouldn't permit me to so much as voice the idea that I'd like to be friends with him."

"Oh," said Claire. "Lui's mentioned a bit of this to me."

"I was too young at the time," Vik explained. "Even if I understood the situation rationally, I still couldn't hide my yearning for this brother figure he was. Maybe Oswald felt humiliated by having to lecture me and serve me like I was his superior."

Claire had never once in her first life seen the self-deprecating expression Vik now wore on his face. She could do nothing but continue to indicate that she was listening.

"My brother has always maintained the appropriate distance from me. It was only recently that we could begin to look each other in the eye and carry on normal discussions."

"Oh my." Claire said, "But when I saw you both talking, I never sensed anything negative. The way he looked at you was so gentle."

"Was it now?" Vik gave her a forlorn smile and then went on. "To be honest, I wish there was some kind of hidden explanation for his behavior."

Claire was silent. It was rare indeed to hear Vik voice such wishful thinking. She felt as if she was just now seeing the pain in his heart, a pain that he'd carried with him ever since the day Dion told him the news and yet one that had never showed on his face.

She bit her lip. *I wish there was something I could do for him*, she thought. Had this been her first life, Claire could have taken him into her arms, but that would not be permitted now. She felt powerless, unable to say or do anything helpful but listen.

Seeing Claire look upset, Vik said in an attempt to cheer her up, "Say, that reminds me."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember when you talked about my retainers the other day? And the sort of friendships you had with them in your first life."

"Pardon? Oh, yes."

Vik, sitting politely on the sofa, shifted and rested one leg upon his knee. "Do you mind if I ask about ours?"

Claire blinked, absorbed in the intimate nature of this conversation. This was a development she had not expected. Frankly, she had no idea what would be wise to say about their relationship. Every one of her memories of him contained a noticeable sense of closeness, and given how perceptive Vik was, he would likely guess in no time at all that they had been engaged. *And if he were to find out*, Claire thought, *he might start fussing over me, which I most certainly do not want.*

After contemplating it briefly, she decided to bring up the most harmless memory she could. "Your Highness once took me on a tour of Wurtz," she explained. "You brought me to the toy store you used to visit incognito as a child."

"Interesting," Vik said, startled. He leaned forward.

"We found out that we both had been working with all our might ever since we were children to win our fathers' praises. Although," Claire added, "that might be too common of a connection."

“Now that you mention it,” Vik said, “you’re right. That brings me back.”

“Then we shared stories, like how you used to sword fight in the palace gardens with Keith, Lui, and the other knights, whereas my older brothers sometimes let me watch or join in their matches. You laughed at how typical that was of me, although I do wonder if perhaps you meant that it wasn’t very ladylike, Vik.”

“Good question,” Vik said. “But I have a feeling I meant something completely different.”

Claire puffed up her cheeks slightly, pouting in indignation. Vik smirked and evaded her eyes. Unlike just moments before, the two felt relaxed around one another.

“Oh yes,” Claire added. “You also brought me to a tall hill that overlooks Wurtz. It was getting to be evening, so the town was all wondrously lit up and beautiful. But even more than that, I was so moved by the whole scenery. It was like all of my happiness in Paffuto was condensed down into that one view.”

Vik’s eyes widened. Claire had expected him to take it calmly, as he had when listening with amusement to the rest of her story only moments before. Claire did not understand why, but Vik stared straight at her without blinking.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“No. It’s nothing.” Vik paused for a moment before he added, “So that really happened, huh?” He put his hand to his chin to hide his mouth. He looked slightly red and embarrassed, as if he were holding back a tiny grin.

“I think now I understand how I saw you in this first life of yours,” he said. After a moment, he added, “Seems like nothing changes no matter which life it is.”

Now it was Claire’s turn to be knocked off guard by the emotion in his voice. When she touched her cheek with a finger, she found it hot.

Her mind reeling, Claire stood up. “Would you like any more tea?” she asked. Vik, still sitting across from her, pulled her back, and she sat down rather awkwardly on the sofa.

“I’ll pass,” Vik said. “I’d better be heading back soon. Those two must be gone by now.”

Unable to fully grasp what had just taken place, Claire only nodded. Vik gave her a gentle smile and said, “Also, you don’t need to call me ‘Your Highness’ in your second life either.”

Claire jolted in surprise. She must have dropped his title during her recollections of her first life. As she struggled to find the words to respond, Vik looked back at her kindly. “Good night,” he said.

There was such a sweet, wonderfully familiar ring to his words that Claire knew she would never be able to fall asleep tonight.

Several days passed without any major developments. According to Vik, the king was informed of the current situation, but the perpetrators could not be charged with a crime until they made some sort of move. This affair affected the royal family’s cohesive power, particularly due to the elder prince’s involvement. Presently, the king had dispatched a select team of soldiers to covertly gather evidence while taking great pains to avoid having this affair treated as a scandal.

Claire had been living in a state of tension, wondering what might occur next, but as time passed, she gradually began to relax. That morning, she donned her uniform and placed a ward on herself as a part of her usual toilette. “Oh spirits,” she chanted, “I beseech you to grant me your divine protection.” *Dion is not reporting me to the Meads, she thought, but I am sure it is only a matter of time before I am discovered.* With this in mind, Vik had opted for Lui to guard Claire until the situation resolved, but Claire had put her foot down. She’d claimed that she could protect herself, much to Vik’s displeasure (and, incidentally, Lui and Denis’s amusement as they stood grinning away behind Vik).

“I will be heading out now, Sophie,” Claire called.

“Have a good day, Miss!”

After checking that her ward was up properly once more, Claire adjusted her posture with a snap and set off. Yet the moment she stepped out the door of

her room in the detached palace, she stiffened. There stood Oswald.

“Good morning, Miss Claire,” he said.

After a pause she replied, “Good morning, Your Highness.”

Oswald carried a stack of documents as if he was en route to his office. Suddenly, a pen tumbled from his hands. Claire swooped down to grab it and passed it back to him.

“Here you are,” she said.

“Thank you.”

The pen was engraved with his coat of arms. Vik’s bore an image of a crown and sword, but Oswald’s was a simple design featuring his name upon a shield as its central element. Even here, Claire found evidence of the prince’s complex circumstances.

Oswald smiled as if he had noticed how the pen had momentarily caught Claire’s eye. “My coat of arms is different from Prince Vik’s,” he explained.

“I apologize for my rudeness in staring,” Claire said. *But with that being said, what is he doing here?* she thought. *The only people who have rooms here in the detached palace are the specialists such as the mages. There should be no reason for Prince Oswald, as highly ranked as he is, to come all this way to pay them a visit.*

“Since you went to such trouble for me,” Oswald said, “why don’t I accompany you to the front of the palace?”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t ask that of you. That would be far too discourteous to you.”

When Oswald smiled, he really did look like Vik. As Claire wondered what to do, he began walking—naturally, to the doors leading out of the palace. She fell in place slightly behind him, highly wary.

Oh? Claire thought as she stepped outside. The coach waiting for her was not the usual one. It did look very similar to hers, but there were minute differences which alerted her to the fact that this was certainly not one of the usual coaches that went to and from the palace. She also did not recognize the

coachman. Furthermore, its doors were closed, nor was there a sign of anyone about to open the door for her. Intuitively, she knew she did not want to see whatever was inside.

What is this? she thought. Alarm bells began ringing inside Claire's head, what with the unexpected run-in with Prince Oswald, the situation she and Vik were caught up in, and the fact that the Meads could learn about her at any moment.

Now, even walking slowly, she was only another ten seconds away from the coach. *Should I teleport away?* she wondered. She was about to rack her brains for escape methods when she reminded herself, *Vik told me that he can't make a move until we have decisive evidence.*

She knew full well that she should not accept an offer to ride in this coach. As a student from Noston, she also knew that she should not make any rash moves. However, the words that Dion had said before she'd Mesmerized him now came to mind. *Considering that your magic is so much stronger than mine, I stand no chance of disposing of you no matter what I may try to come up with.* As Claire's most pressing desire was to protect Vik, this comment alone was enough to spur her into action. *If I think of it less as an abduction and more as a chance to spy upon the enemy, then I won't be scared,* she thought.

Lost in thought, she only now realized the coach stood directly before her. Oswald must have stopped behind her, for suddenly he whispered to her, "Check the study."

This made no sense to Claire. Just as she was about to turn around to ask him to repeat what he had said, the coach's door opened.

Inside sat a beautiful girl with bewitching black hair, her yellow-gold eyes twinkling with an enchanting light. "Good morning, Lady Claire," said the girl. The sight of her took Claire's breath away. Naturally, the girl wasn't dressed in a uniform. Her appearance was a close match to Dion's. *I know who she is,* Claire thought.

The moment she realized the girl's identity, Claire smiled. This was just what she had expected. "Good morning," she said. "I take it we are sharing a coach today. Do you mind if I join you?"

The girl was silent for a moment. "So you really don't know anything, do you?"

You poor thing.”

The moment the girl said this, Claire felt a handkerchief clapped over her mouth, and a powerful medicinal scent assaulted her nostrils. *This isn't magic*, she realized. Of course, the drug had no effect on Claire thanks to her ward.

This was Dion's twin sister, Diana, and she seemed intent on taking Claire away to somewhere else.

“What...did you do...?” Claire asked. *Thank goodness this is a drug*, she thought. *I might accidentally have reflected it back on her had she used a spell*. With that thought in mind, Claire pretended to faint.

Claire could not be sure of exactly how much time had passed, but the coach did not seem to have gone far before it stopped outside a mansion. She'd faked unconsciousness during the drive over but stayed alert for hints of her surroundings.

I can tell that this coach has a magic-disabling spell cast over it, she thought. *That explains why they used a drug to knock me out*. However, this spell was not meant to handle such powerful magic as Claire's. She thought that, at best, it might repel light blue magic or thereabouts. The spell was more than sufficient to disable the magic of most any ordinary young lady, but Claire felt uneasy. *According to what Dion said*, she thought, *the Meads should be aware of the fact that my magic is more powerful than this*. *This strikes me as odd*.

When the coach came to a stop, Claire heard several people gathering around it. Pretending to be out cold all the while, she felt someone gently lift her up.

“Oh! Make sure you carry her carefully,” Diana yelled from somewhere directly above Claire's head. “For I'll surprise my lord grandfather with her later!”

She was being carried away in someone's arms, Claire realized. She was aware of this person climbing a staircase, navigating several twists and turns, and finally laying her down on what felt like a soft bench.

“Good work,” said Diana. “You may be done now.”

“Would it not be best to place her under surveillance, my lady?” said an

unknown voice.

“It’ll be fine. This room has a magic-disabling spell on it,” Diana explained. “I will be heading out for a brief bit myself, as it’s been so long since I’ve been to our villa in the capital! Once my lord father and grandfather find out that I’ve gone into town for fun, they’ll be so shocked!”

The sheer lightheartedness of this mid-abduction conversation exhausted Claire even as she lay in her pretend faint. Before long, she heard the click of a key in the lock followed by the sound of several pairs of footsteps growing fainter by the moment. Once she knew that she was alone, Claire stealthily cracked open her eyes.

“Where am I?” she asked herself. She had assumed that she’d been brought into some storeroom, but that was not at all the case, as a portrait elaborately framed upon a marble wall immediately stood out to her. Additionally, the room boasted a grand white table and a deep crimson rug. Even the place where Claire sat felt like a fine-quality bench, upholstered in plush velvet.

She took in her surroundings and saw a door leading into the adjacent room. Gingerly, she opened that door and peeped through to find an enormous canopy bed. She was clearly in a parlor meant for entertaining guests.

“Oh spirits, I beseech you to grant me your divine protection,” she said. Diana had just mentioned that this room was overlaid with a spell that rendered magic useless; however, Claire could still feel magic welling up to the surface of her body in response to her words. At any rate, she deduced, this disabling spell must have had the same level of efficacy as the one laid over the coach. *It appears that I can use magic with no issue*, she thought. *This means that I can escape at any time by teleporting away.*

Additionally, judging from Diana’s comments, this building was the Meads’ villa in Wurtz. At least two parties had carried out her abduction—the Meads and Oswald. Furthermore, Claire was an honored guest from Noston. *When I get back to the palace*, she thought, *I could indict them with the charge of kidnapping a schoolgirl. However, we still lack any proof of a plot targeting the Crown. If I act rashly, this may very well hurt Vik.*

Her mind made up, Claire sat back down on the bench to wait.

While Claire waited over at the Meads' villa, Lydia approached Vik after school and asked, "Is Lady Claire absent today? Did something happen?"

"I suppose she is," said Vik, his face clouding over with a frown. "Yet I didn't hear anything about it. I'll drop in and check on her once I'm home."

Claire had attended the Academy for half a year now, but she had not missed a single day until this moment. *Lui vouches for the quality of her wards*, Vik reminded himself. *I'm sure nothing could have happened to her, yet all the same...*

On the coach ride home, as Vik stewed in his worry over Claire, Dion said, "Your Highness, I was planning on telling you this evening, but perhaps I'd best bring it up now. You see, I received a rather ominous letter from my family this morning."

"What sort of ominous letter?" Vik asked.

"My sister wrote to inform me that there will be a family conference tomorrow, so I had best formulate an excuse and return to the Mead villa here in the capital. My lord father does not trust Diana much, so I did not think this was a cause for much alarm."

"Well," said Vik, "that certainly piques my interest."

Only moments later, Vik arrived at the palace. Lui dashed up with a piece of paper, ready to inform him that Claire had infiltrated the Meads. "Vik, look at this!" she cried.

"What could all this mean?" Vik said, scanning over the letter. "I know Claire didn't go to school today, but to think it's come to this..."

"This letter arrived from Claire earlier," Lui explained. "She wrote, 'I am presently at the Meads' villa in Wurtz. I shall find evidence of their plot and then escape. Please wait until tomorrow morning for me.' This morning, the guards saw her climbing into a different coach than the one she normally takes. Reportedly, she was with Prince Oswald at the time."

“Where is he now?”

“He has apparently gone on holiday as of today and is nowhere to be found in the palace. When I questioned his retainers, they said that he suddenly cleared his schedule a few days before and caused them quite a stir.”

Vik squeezed his hands into fists. *Claire*, he thought. *You asked me to depend on you if the situation ever called for it. But can I sit by and let you handle this on your own?*

“How will you respond?” Lui asked. “I know what Claire said, but I can make ready to leave if you’d rather rescue her at once. That is my advice, if I speak as your friend.”

“Of course,” Vik said. “Let’s go at once.”

“However, the fact that Claire sent a letter via magic out of a room with a magic-disabling spell cast upon it is proof that she can move about with a certain degree of freedom. *This* is my opinion if I speak as your retainer.”

Vik fell silent.

“And,” Lui continued, “Claire possesses magical ability with a color unheard of in our world. Either option will do, so how will you respond?”

The memory of Claire’s smile during their tea for two a few days prior flashed through Vik’s mind. He felt in it the quintessence of that ever-present resolve of the girl who was always burdened with some responsibility.

“We will wait for her through the night,” he finally said. “The moment dawn breaks tomorrow morning, we shall go to bring her home.”

“As you command.”

Just after Claire finished sending off her letter via magic, Diana arrived bearing a tray with drinks and refreshments. Diana had brought her a meal, Claire realized.

“Oh, are you awake now?” Diana asked.

“Yes,” said Claire. “Thank you for letting me have such a good rest. Now, might I ask for your name and where we are?”

“This is the Mead villa, and I am Diana Mead.” Diana paused for a moment before adding, “I have to say, I’m surprised you’re so relaxed after we brought you here without telling you anything. You really are the trusting sort, aren’t you?”

Claire had chosen her words carefully so as to make Diana think she knew nothing, but she now realized even that caution was unnecessary. Moreover, Diana hadn’t the slightest qualm in giving her real name and location. *For a kidnapping conspired between the Meads and Prince Oswald, Claire thought, this is...quite odd.*

“When will I be able to return home to the palace?” she asked. “I’m sure everyone must be so worried about me.”

“Unfortunately,” Diana said, “you can’t go home. My lord father and grandfather will be returning home tomorrow morning for a family conference wherein I intend to present you. I know they’ll be overjoyed!”

Claire couldn’t believe her own ears. *Does Diana mean to tell me that she chose to kidnap me all on her own?* she thought. She paled at the sheer recklessness of it.

“Pardon me,” Claire said, “but do you not suppose your lord father and grandfather may chastise your ladyship for making such a decision without their input?”

“Huh?” said Diana. “They’re always chastising me! They keep saying I’m a fool, and they always let Dion handle everything. I want to hear nice words for a change! You know? You understand how I feel, don’t you?”

“I beg your pardon,” said Claire, “but I do not.”

“Right, because you’re just so lucky. I’m jealous of you; I really am. At any rate, why’re they using this stupid plan that takes forever to get their hands on you? It makes no sense, especially after taking all the trouble to send Dion in as an insider.”

“Who can say? I’m afraid I don’t know that either.”

At any rate, Claire told herself, Diana did not appear to have been informed about the strength of Claire’s magic, which explained why such a weak spell had

been cast over the room. *I'm not sure how to phrase this*, she thought, *but I don't think Diana is quite that bad. I even feel as if on the night of the party when she asked me about my mother, she might've genuinely just had no idea.* Claire's wariness of her immediately vanished.

"How would you know?" Diana said. "Prince Oswald's the only one who understands me anyway."

"Prince Oswald?" Claire prompted.

"Yeah! My grandfather brought him home recently. He always listens to me, and he's so nice!" Diana's face lit up so brightly that Claire found it almost unsettling.

Prince Oswald absolutely does not look like the type, she thought. *That reminds me. He said something quite fascinating to me moments before I got in the coach—to search the study.* Claire now remembered the way Oswald had looked at Vik during the Decennial Ceremony. It had not been a look of animosity or resentment, yet neither was it reverential nor envious. It was more... Yes, more like the warm kindness of an older brother.

"This morning, Prince Oswald led me to your ladyship's carriage," Claire said. "May I take it to understand that you two are allies in this operation?"

"We are," Diana confirmed. "Did you know, I had a chance to talk with him just one-on-one the time he came to our estate! When I said I wanted to get the better of Dion, he came up with this plan to kidnap you. He said maybe even my lord father and grandfather would be proud of me if I pulled it off without them finding out!"

Claire found Diana's enthusiasm overwhelming, but she nevertheless sighed in relief. This was merely a childish attempt at a kidnapping plot. Despite the fact that Claire was supposed to be confined, she was still perfectly capable of using magic. Had Diana not been the main perpetrator, then this would not have been such a simple matter.

Claire thought to herself, *I believe I understand Prince Oswald now. Oh, Vik...* This explanation of his behavior also aligned with Vik's unflagging hope for him. Claire wanted to hurry and tell Vik at once.

But first, Claire supposed, Diana seemed willing to tell her just about anything. Figuring that it would not hurt to ask, Claire decided to try broaching the question directly. “Pardon me,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Might I ask where the study is in this fine mansion of yours?”

“Right out this room and down the corridor!” Diana declared. “But you can’t leave this room, you know. Still, I guess there’s nothing for it. I’ll bring some books for you so you won’t get bored tonight.”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary.”

Abel Rioux, marquis and head of a long-standing noble line in Paffuto, said, “On that subject, I must inform you—although it isn’t public knowledge yet—that I’ve heard rumor that the girl in the detached palace has gone missing.”

Oswald raised an eyebrow at the news. “Really now?” he said. “I certainly hope she hasn’t been abducted or anything of the sort.”

The two sat in a private room in the restaurant of a town that was a few hours by horse from Wurtz. Noise from the merry dining hall outside drifted in as they held their private conversation with the Earl Mead and his predecessor. The topic of discussion was, without a doubt, related to reclaiming the throne.

“No,” said Marquis Rioux, “but if I may be frank, when I first approached Your Highness with the suggestion of conspiring together, I never expected you to offer such enthusiastic support. Being as Your Highness is a member of the royal family, I thought I would have to resort to dirtier methods.”

Oswald smiled elegantly.



“Why, merely accepting an invitation to dine with you is enough to incriminate me. It’s amusing to think you don’t consider *that* to be a dirty trick on your part,” Oswald said. “However, I certainly am not trusted. And they aren’t in the wrong for feeling so, are they? ...Besides, I’ve also had these sorts of thoughts, namely wondering if I could be of some use after being treated like a spare part for so long.”

“History also tells us that no elder prince second in line for the throne has ever avoided having treachery in his heart,” intoned the former Earl Mead, Dion and Diana’s grandfather, in a low, solemn voice.

“And on that note,” the Earl Mead asked, “why is it that we are gathered here today? We always conduct our business in the capital.”

Oswald paused before responding. “Well, there’s nothing wrong with having days like this, is there? Besides, a conversation like ours can only be held in a large town outside the capital where we can become lost in the crowds.”

He held his full wine glass up to the light.

Dawn broke, and Claire, supposedly confined in the Meads’ mansion, poked her head out the door of the room and looked down the corridor. “Ridiculous,” she sighed, weary. “There isn’t anyone out here.”

Diana seemed to have no concerns about Claire, having placed her in a room with a magic-disabling spell on it; thus, when Claire opened the door timidly, she found that no one stood guard outside it. Furthermore, the room’s lock, unlike those on safes and the like, was fragile and could be tampered with by magic. *I know they don’t expect me to be able to use any sort of great magic,* she thought, *but this is just shoddy. At this rate, I doubt there was even a need to wait for dawn in fear of making noise.*

Claire decided that now was her moment, and she crept out of the room. *Diana said that the study is just down the passage,* she thought.

While the mansion was only the second home of an earl, the inside was much more spacious than she could have imagined. She moved with deliberate caution, careful not to make a sound, and finally reached her goal. *Here it is!*

she thought.

The room had nary a speck of dust, and Claire could tell that it was a well-used place. *Prince Oswald advised me to investigate the study*, she thought. *That must mean that there is irrefutable proof of their plotting here.* She could guess proof would not be found within the many books lining the walls, but this room surely also housed important documents.

With that in mind, Claire touched the large writing desk in front of her. The room's owner was clearly not the meticulous type if the untidy heap of papers, clearly visible despite the gloom, was anything to judge by.

She pulled open each drawer one by one and perused the papers. *No*, she thought. *Not this either. To begin with, I'm not sure what constitutes proof anyway.*

Time flew by, and the sky outside began to gradually lighten. She knew soon it would be time for the conference that Diana had mentioned. Just as Claire began to feel a bit flustered, several sheets of paper fluttered off of the pile atop the desk. She thought nothing of it and went to pick them up, only to realize that she recognized the coat of arms on one of the pages.

"What's this?" she cried.

At the villa's front entrance, Vik and the Earl Mead were engaged in a heated argument.

"Did not the schoolgirl entrusted to us by the kingdom of Noston come to your villa?" Vik asked.

"A schoolgirl?" the earl repeated. "I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about. I've only just now returned home myself."

"I should like to check inside your mansion to confirm that she is not here," said Vik.

"Does Your Highness have a warrant from His Majesty the King?"

The earl grinned widely as he politely refused Vik. His confidence in his own words was all too apparent. *What could this mean?* Vik thought. *Is Claire not*

here after all? He began to regret having waited all night before coming to fetch Claire.

Just then, Diana, alerted by all the commotion in the lobby, popped out from an inner room. “Welcome home, father!” she cried. “I have wonderful news for y— Oh, what is happening here?”

“Leave, Diana,” the earl commanded. “His Highness has granted us a visit. I can’t claim to understand what is going on, but he appears to be searching for some Nostonian schoolgirl.”

Diana looked away from Vik, unable to meet his eyes for just a split second, but this did not escape Vik’s notice. “Do you know anything about this?” he asked her.

“A-About what?” she stammered. “I know nothing.”

“Earl Mead, Miss Claire Martino is our honored guest from one of our allies. Under my authority as the crown prince, I demand that you let me search this mansion. Guards, enter!”

At Vik’s command, his retinue at once pushed past the Meads and into the mansion. In the midst of the confusion, the Earl Mead turned on Diana, trembling in wrath. “Claire Martino?” he repeated. “What is the meaning of this?”

Diana faltered before admitting, “I heard from Prince Oswald, you see. That there was this Claire girl we’d like to get our hands on, and that she lives in the palace. Even though Dion’s been into the palace and Academy both, he doesn’t seem to have noticed her, so Prince Oswald and I worked together to bring her here. I was going to tell everyone when we were all gathered today. But you have to be kidding me if you think she’ll end up protecting the royal family. It was so easy to bring her here and all!”

Diana looked as if she understood that her father’s fury spelled trouble, but little else of the situation itself.

“Why the blazes did you do such a thing without telling us?” the earl thundered.

“Because it’s always all about you and grandfather and Dion,” Diana whined.

“And I’m perfectly capable of handling it on my own! Well, but Prince Oswald did help me. He’s our ally, isn’t he?”

“I see now. Damn you!” the earl spat. He raised his voice further. “Confound it, Diana! What did you do to this Noston girl?”

“F-Father...?” Diana’s sulky expression, proof of her conviction that she had done nothing wrong, stiffened.

“Your Highness!” the earl called. “My daughter has confessed to holding this girl from Noston in our household! It was only done from minor jealousy, as is so common in these young girls. My daughter will take you to her now, so there is no need to search the house.”

“You’re telling me that this was your daughter’s decision, and hers alone?” Vik asked. He trained frigid eyes on the earl. *She is only a girl of fifteen*, he thought. *Is he really going to have her shoulder the blame for the entire crime?*

“Yes, indeed,” said the earl. “Up until this moment, I knew nothing of the whole affair. Now, Diana will take you to this Claire you speak of at once, so I do repeat, you needn’t search my home. Please call off your guards.”

Vik could feel the earl’s strong desire to prevent him from searching the house. *Whatever the truth may be*, he thought, *the man is willing to offer up his own daughter merely to avoid an investigation*. Vik found this utterly repulsive. His anger spiked, but just then, he heard a voice from upstairs.

“Why,” said the voice, “what does your lordship wish to hide so badly? Could it be this?”

Having discovered evidence of the collusion between Earl Mead and Marquis Rioux, Claire heard a commotion outside the window and lifted the curtain slightly to peep out. Much to her surprise, there stood several dozen knights being led by none other than Vik.

“Oh no!” Claire cried. “He must have been worried about me, and now he’s come to fetch me.” She rushed out of the study, the several pieces of paper in hand.

As she ran through the mansion, she heard the earl’s attempts to stop the

soldiers from entering his home. Slowly descending the stairs, Claire called out, “Why, what does your lordship wish to hide so badly? Could it be this?”

“Claire!” Vik cried. “Are you hurt?” Relief flooded his tense face.

Once she reached the ground floor, Claire met Vik’s eye and gave him a smile that stretched across her whole face, never mind the fact that this was hardly the place for such things. Next, she turned to Diana, who was too surprised to speak. “Lady Diana,” Claire said, “I do apologize for lying to you.”

“Huh?” Diana cried. “How did you manage to leave that room?”

“I apologize,” Claire repeated. She knew full well that no logical reason necessitated such an apology, but she did indeed feel guilty for having tricked Diana into thinking she’d accomplished a successful abduction.

Then, Claire turned once more to face Earl Mead. “I understand that this paper is familiar to you.”

“Not that!” the Earl cried. He made to snatch the paper from her, but Vik blocked his way.

“What is this?” Vik asked.

“I found it in a room upstairs,” Claire explained. “It is a bill of receipt for an order which illicitly bypasses the palace in order to obtain large amounts of weapons and supplies. Furthermore, His Highness Prince Oswald’s seal is upon it.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Vik muttered. He took the paper from Claire and pored over the contents with fierce concentration. Paffuto and Noston both implemented systems which prevented the creation of large stockpiles of emergency provisions or arms without the royal palace’s approval as a strict preventative measure against rebellion. When violated, the offending party would face the harsh penalty of having their lands and titles stripped from them. Furthermore, in the event of a plot to overthrow the government, the offender faced a far harsher punishment: execution.

“Lord Mead, Lady Diana,” Vik ordered, “you are to return with me to the palace. We will bring the former earl as well.”

Now that the court had obtained proof of the plot, the natural order of things demanded a trial. However, the outcome was known before litigation even commenced. After Vik saw to it that all three of the Meads were taken away, Claire approached him and, as they were in the presence of guards, addressed him formally. “Do please wait, Your Highness,” she said.

At her voice, Vik’s eyes, so stern up until moments before, trembled. He looked upset, as if suddenly alerted to Claire’s presence or as if he harbored a childish feeling. He made no response.

The lack of reply puzzled Claire, and just as she made to address him again, he stepped towards her. First one slow step, and then—he took her in his arms.

The guards were astonished. Claire did not understand what was going on, save for the realization that Vik’s arms around her were very strong.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” he whispered hoarsely.

Once Claire pieced together his meaning, she felt terribly guilty over what she’d done. “I apologize for worrying you,” she said. “But there is something I must tell you.”

“What is it?” Vik’s arms around her did not slacken. She made an effort to free herself, but he refused to let go.

What does this mean? Claire thought.

“Your Highness,” Lui prompted, her voice full of exasperation. “Look around you.”

“...Ah.” Vik finally let Claire step free. Sure enough, while none of the guards were outright staring, the level of attention aimed in Claire and Vik’s direction was uncomfortable.

Claire rallied herself, trying to hide her embarrassment and red cheeks. She had an extremely important announcement to make to Vik, one he had been hoping for, after all.

“His Highness Prince Oswald is not complicit with Earl Mead and Marquis Rioux’s treachery,” she said. “On the contrary, I believe he has been acting in order to protect Your Highness.”



Vik was astonished. “Whatever do you mean?” he asked.

“Yesterday morning, His Highness the Prince showed me his coat of arms while escorting me to my coach. He also gave me the hint to search the study. Based on his position, I believe that he revealed the plot in the way that would be the most easily credible, for I am only a girl from another kingdom and am unaffiliated with the affairs of Paffuto.”

“I see,” said Vik. “Thank you for your report.” He smiled then, and while it was no more than his usual reserved smile, Claire sensed the relief behind it. She could not help but feel pleased.

Chapter 7

The trial for Oswald, the Mead family, and the Rioux family proceeded swiftly. Given Paffuto's history, treason against the Crown was a serious crime. No matter the cause of rebellion, execution was unavoidable for the perpetrators.

A week after the arrests, it was determined that the two elder Meads and Marquis Rioux were to be executed, while their remaining kin would be stripped of all titles and wealth and banished to other kingdoms. Dion alone, in recognition of his efforts to stop the treason, was granted a reduced penalty. While he could not carry on the line of House Mead, he was permitted to take a new name for himself and continue to live in Paffuto.

And as for Oswald...

"Has His Highness left already?" Claire asked.

"I was told he departed early this morning," Dion explained. "He did not want any sort of special send-off."

Claire smiled weakly. Her testimony had confirmed that Oswald had acted in secrecy in order to safeguard Vik. Naturally, this was not the focus of the trial, and many expected that Claire's testimony could turn the tide of public opinion in his favor with the nobles who had previously thought ill of him. However, when the verdict came down, Oswald himself decided to leave the country.

"His Highness Prince Oswald made his choice to prevent any further conspiracy against Vik," Claire said. "Well, certainly, lacking an additional heir to the throne will do away with one point of contention."

"But don't you think it's incredible that he forsook his title and gave up all his rights as a prince?" Dion asked. "I think everyone presumed that the princes were too victimized by circumstance to ever get along, but Prince Oswald really was a good older brother, wasn't he?"

Claire sighed deeply. "Indeed. I suppose Vik wasn't the only one who wished they could have been closer."

“I’m sure that in our first life, the Marquis Rioux must have framed him for the crime or something of the sort, don’t you think? But I imagine that you being here in this second life has made all the difference.”

Dion spoke brightly, but in the end, everything had turned out the same for the Meads. *Prince Oswald is safe, but due to my actions, Dion’s father and grandfather will lose their lives*, Claire reminded herself.

As Claire’s mood darkened, Dion pulled his Academy student card from his pocket. “Look at this,” he said. “It says I’m Dion Minogue now. Don’t you think that’s nice?”

It took Claire a moment before she could say, “Yes. That’s a lovely name.”

Today was the day of the executions for those involved in this insidious plot. Claire and Dion sat at a slight distance from one another in the otherwise-empty church. The hall echoed with their conversation. The morning sun streamed down through the stained glass windows in the pure white ceiling, enveloping the room in a feeling of sanctity.

“I got it from the name of a protagonist in a book my father bought for me long ago,” Dion said. “It bears no connection with the Mead family, so I think it’s appropriate. Don’t you?”

Claire was unable to respond and merely nodded.

Dion smiled at her innocently. “You do know that, regardless of me being Mesmerized, I came with you knowing full well that this would happen, right?” He paused and then continued. “Still, now that it is happening, I can’t say it isn’t difficult. Even if they were vile criminals, they were still my family.”

Claire remained silent once more. If she hadn’t Mesmerized him, there may still have been hope for the Mead family to avoid this punishment. But of course, that would have led to them hurting the royal family. Considering this, Claire did not feel that anything she could say would be appropriate for the moment.

Far off in the distance, she could hear the crowds heckling the criminals. Dion looked as if he wanted to cover his ears and drown out the sound, but he only continued gazing straight ahead. As the two prayed, the moment stretched out

so very, very long it felt as if it lasted forever.

That evening, Claire received a summons from Vik to his chambers. He was, she learned, hosting a farewell party for Prince Oswald with all their friends. Although the prince in question had already made his departure, Claire supposed this get-together was for the sake of Vik gaining a sense of closure.

She set off for the wing of the palace where the royal family lived, armed with a bottle of strong wine she recalled Vik appreciating in times like these during her first life. As she passed in front of the knights' apartments, she wondered briefly whether she should call out to them before ultimately deciding against it. *I suppose they might already be in Vik's room*, she reasoned.

Thanks to this most recent incident, Claire was more well recognized than ever, and the guards made no move to stop her on her way to Vik's room. When she greeted the guard in front of Vik's door, he informed her, "His Highness is waiting for you."

Claire stood anxiously before the door. She tried knocking on it lightly, but no response came. She'd assumed that Lui and the others must have been there already, but she could hear no voices inside. *These are his private rooms*, she thought, *but I wonder if I would be allowed to enter anyway*.

Come to think of it, this was her first visit to Vik's private quarters. Pragmatically speaking, it would not have been appropriate for her to visit his quarters alone. Claire had a sneaking suspicion that Lui was even now on her way to the detached palace to escort her and avoid any sort of scandal. *Perhaps I'd better head back and wait for her*, she thought. *Yet...*

After deliberating over it, Claire carefully pushed the heavy door open.

"Oh, you're the first one here," Vik remarked. He sat alone on the marble floor in this enormous room, easily three times the size of Claire's apartments. Curiously enough, despite the lack of lamplight, the full moon shining in through the window prevented the room from feeling dark. From the open windows leading out to the terrace, a breeze blew in and waved the curtains.

"Apparently so," Claire said. "The other three aren't here yet?"

“Nope,” said Vik. “I sent Lui to come get you, but I take it you didn’t run into her?”

“Oh, I just knew you’d sent her,” Claire groaned. “I’m sorry for wasting her time like this.”

Vik smiled lightly, poured a glass of liquor, and then offered it to Claire. The liquor bottle was rather special, she noticed. *It sparkles*, she thought. *How beautiful.*

Vik noticed her interest in the bottle and explained, “This is an unusual bottle in that it changes color depending on how the light touches it. Did you know that it’s not done by magic either? I received this as a present from Oswald for my fifteenth birthday. He promised we’d drink it together once I’d been crowned king.”

Claire did not know how best to respond. All she could do was nod in affirmation.

“He had always been a distant figure to me for as long as I’d known him,” Vik continued. “I have no memories of us playing together, but I do remember being told to never get closer to him than was strictly necessary.”

“Oh my,” Claire said.

“To tell you the truth, when you told me your story about what was to happen with Oswald and me, I’d assumed it wouldn’t bother me at all. I’ve lived in such a state of vigilance since I was very young that I only thought this was par for the course. And yet still...” Vik faltered momentarily.

The scent of fragrant olives blew in from the window and mixed with the aroma of the nearby liquor. It was sweet and yet heartbreaking. Claire’s vision blurred with tears at the thought of these complex feelings Vik had harbored for so long.

Vik turned his back to her and muttered, “If only I was stronger.”

He looked so small standing there. The Vik Claire knew was so very mature she could hardly believe they were the same age. He lived for the sake of his kingdom, withstanding the weight of unimaginable pressure, and yet he had but precious few people he could trust with his entire heart.

Vik likely couldn't even have stopped Oswald from pursuing the decision to prioritize his duties, forsake everything, and leave the kingdom behind. For these past several weeks, Claire realized, Vik must have been consumed with agony over his own powerlessness while never once showing a hint of it to anyone else. No matter what happened now, he would also continue to put on a brave front from here on out. Even, Claire thought, in front of his retainers.

Vik made a tiny noise, and only then did Claire realize that his shoulders were shaking ever so slightly. Before she could think, her body moved for her. The glass fell from Vik's hand with a clunk and rolled away. Neither Claire nor Vik took any notice as its contents stained the carpet.

Instead, Claire enfolded Vik into an embrace to hide the tears spilling from his eyes.



Vik said not a word, nor did he make a move to hold Claire back. Yet Claire herself did not move either. Neglecting to wipe up even her own tears, her only desire was to hold him ever, ever so tightly.

Claire awoke the next morning with eyes puffy from weeping. *It's hard to see*, she thought. *Thank goodness today is a day off from school.*

Sophie, understanding the situation from the look on Claire's face, added a towel to Claire's morning tea tray. "I've brought you a cold towel, Miss," Sophie said.

"Thank you." Claire paused before adding, "Do I really look that bad?"

"Oh, heavens, I wouldn't say that, Miss," Sophie said.

She's lying, Claire thought. The suggestive smile Sophie was giving her made Claire afraid to look in the mirror.

Just then, she heard the bell at the entrance.

"Good morning, Claire," said the unexpected visitor.

"Lui!" Claire cried.

"I thought your eyes might be swollen, so I dropped by with medicine from the holy woman which will clear them up this very morning." She presented a brown paper bag to Claire.

"Thank you, Lui. I had no idea medicine for crying too much existed."

"Oh yes," said Lui. "But there is a bit of a trick involved for it to work."

She tore off the top of the bag and poured the light blue powder into her hand. She charged it with magic for several seconds before scattering it into Claire's small washbasin.

"Once you wash your face with this, you'll be good as new," Lui promised. "It'll help cheer you up too."

"Thank you for going to all the trouble," Claire said. "You've made me very glad."

"And that," Lui said, indicating a breakfast trolley, "is from Vik."

Claire tilted her head in confusion.

“Let’s have breakfast together,” Lui said. “I told him he should be the one bringing it over, but he got too embarrassed.”

Then, Claire’s actions on the night before came back to her, and she turned bright red. *What on earth was I thinking yesterday?* she wondered.

Last night, Claire’s hug had given Vik such a shock that he’d stopped crying on the spot. That on its own was all well and good, but the issue lay with Claire. Unable to stop sobbing herself, Vik and the knights, when the latter had finally arrived, ended up in such a tizzy trying to console her that it became a whole to-do.

Claire wanted to hide her face in the bedsheets and scream. What had possessed her to have the audacity to raise such a commotion? And to hug him, at that!

Lui chuckled maturely as she watched Claire’s busy face flash back and forth between red embarrassment and pale horror. “Thank you for taking some of the weight off of Vik’s shoulders yesterday,” she said.

“Oh, Lui,” Claire groaned.

“Vik would rather die than cry in front of us. No matter what trial he faces, he always looks calm and stays positive. As his retainer, I couldn’t be more proud of him. But as his friend, he worries me.”

“No,” Claire said. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Here, hadn’t we better tuck into breakfast before it gets cold? I brought pancakes fresh off the griddle.”

Hurried along by Lui, Claire finished her toilette and took her seat. The meal was Claire’s favorite breakfast of pancakes with maple syrup, with even a little milk pitcher of extra syrup on the side. The pancakes were buried under a mountain of strawberries, blueberries, and fluffy cream. Finally, a pot of tea rounded out the spread.

I wonder if I can eat all this, Claire thought. However, when it was sent as a token of Vik’s gratitude, she couldn’t possibly leave any on the plate. Rubbing

her stomach, she made up her mind to dig in—when the doorbell rang again.

“But are you sure you don’t mind sharing such a lovely breakfast with me?” Dion asked with a smile. His cheeks bulged with pancakes.

Lui and Claire exchanged grins.



“But of course,” said Claire. “The more, the merrier.”

“True,” Lui remarked. “If only my cowardly lord hadn’t somehow missed that memo.”

“Oh, that would have been wonderful if he had shown up,” said Dion. “I would have loved to share my last meal here with His Highness.”

Claire put down her fork. “So you really are leaving Wurtz today?”

“That’s right. Of course, I’ll be leaving the Academy too. With all my relatives in exile, I have no one to support me. But for the first time in my life, I am free. I want to try living exactly as I please, just as you do, Claire.”

Those yellow-gold eyes of his were tinged with sadness, yet they glowed nevertheless.

“I’m sure there must be some way to live within Wurtz and make use of your talents,” Claire insisted. “But for that, you would need an education.”

It was only after she’d said this that the realization hit her. While he might act rashly at times, Dion would undoubtedly thrive with the right person to guide him at his side. However, he had wanted to live free. Urging him to make the most of his talents was only tying him down. She was no better than the Meads.

“I’m sorry,” Claire said. “Let me take that back.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” said Dion. “If anything, I’m glad you have a high enough opinion of me to say that.”

Lui had been listening to the two but now spoke up. “One might almost say that we’ve been *too* generous in the leniency we’ve shown you, Dion. I think Vik certainly did his best there.”

“Oh yes, but of course,” Dion said. “I know full well that I can’t stay here, even if I truly wanted to.” Claire could hear a trace of lingering attachment in his words.

As the idea she’d just verbally withdrawn once again occurred to her, Claire gripped the fabric of her skirt. “Lord Dion,” she said. “I still have not committed to keeping a guard here in Paffuto; although, I’d intended to look into employing someone once I had the time. If you would be so amenable...” She

paused before continuing. "Would you be so kind as to work for me?"

Dion's eyes widened. A big strawberry fell off the end of his fork with a plop.

"Me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"To be your guard, Miss Claire?"

"Yes."

"Interesting," Lui remarked. "If Dion forms a contract directly with the Martino family, then I suppose he could indeed stay in the palace. And as Claire is being treated as our honored guest, I suppose being her guard would not prove too difficult of a job."

"Of course, what's most important is what you want, Dion," Claire urged. "I didn't offer this because I feel responsible for having Mesmerized you. It's simply that I do think highly of you. But as you've lived your whole life up until now as the heir to an earldom, I'm afraid it might be insulting to serve as my guardsman."

"Miss Claire," Dion said. He smiled at her bashfully but without any aversion to the idea.

"In that case," Lui said, "we'd have to arrange for the Martinos to write up a contract at once. As of yesterday, the Meads no longer possess an earldom. For Dion's sake, it'd be best for him to have a patron as soon as possible."

"Then I'll do just that, Lui," Claire promised. "I'll write to my brother at once."

Writing to Benjamin would do just as well, but if Claire was honest with herself, she rather felt that he lacked much interest in her. In fact, he'd barely written to her at all thus far. By way of comparison, she felt that Oscar, desiring to forge ties with the royal family of Paffuto, would be faster to respond.

The sooner, the better, so Claire left her breakfast and wrote the letter at once. In addition to explaining that she wished to employ a guard with the Martino family name, she also recorded a history of Dion's life thus far. She stressed that she wanted a formal contract with simple conditions in order to be submitted to the Crown of Paffuto before ending the letter with her

signature. *And with this*, she thought, *he'll be all right*.

With the task complete, she sat back down to her now stone-cold pancakes.

“Would you like any warm tea, Miss?” Sophie offered.

“Thank you, Sophie,” Claire said.

Lui gave Sophie a grateful smile before sipping her own freshly refilled cup of tea.

“Claire, your brother occupies an important position in the Nostonian government, doesn't he?” asked Dion. “I suppose it'll be a few days before we receive a response.”

“Yes,” Claire said. “Once the contract is formally finalized, I plan for you to come to live in one of the unoccupied rooms. Until then, would you mind staying in a hotel?”

“Of course not. I'll be patient and wait,” he said.

Claire sighed in relief. For the time being, Dion would not have to leave Wurtz after all.

Just then, Sophie, moments after collecting the cold tea, poked her head back in from the entranceway. “Miss, there are letters from Duke Martino and Prince Asbert for you. They're rather thick letters, at that.”

The steam was still rising from the cup in Claire's hand. Behind her, she thought she heard Lui mutter, “Well, that was fast.”

“Lord Oscar, there is a letter for you from your sister, Lady Claire,” an attendant announced.

That morning found Oscar in his office at Noston's royal palace. As he had no particularly pressing business today, he immediately turned his attention to Claire's letter. It informed him that she had chosen a man to be her guard in Paffuto, namely the heir of a now-ruined earl, whom Prince Vik of Paffuto esteemed highly.

“I see now,” Oscar said. “In order to win Prince Vik's affection, she intends to have a man he admires become her personal attendant? Clever girl! With that

being the case, I must make haste.”

Committing a major misunderstanding all the while, Oscar set about to handle Claire’s request with utmost haste. He nimbly wrote up a contract as was described in the letter and stamped it with the Martino family seal.

“It would be all the better to send it back with Prince Asbert’s seal,” Oscar mused, “to show that she has the full power of Noston at her back.”

Serendipitously, Oscar also had other business with Asbert. Thinking that he’d ask the prince to attend to both if Asbert seemed unoccupied, he gathered up his freshly drawn-up document and sailed out of his office.

To Oscar’s surprise, the only one unoccupied in Asbert’s office turned out to be Charlotte. “Charlotte?” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“O-Oscar!” she yelped.

“If you have no classes at the Academy today, shouldn’t you be taking lessons with Lady Anne?”

“She sent a message to inform me we’d have our lessons in the afternoon today,” Charlotte said, smoothing over her shock with a smile.

Oscar glanced up and caught Salomon’s eye as he stood behind Asbert. Confirming Oscar’s suspicions, Salomon smiled faintly and shook his head no.

“We received no such message at home,” Oscar informed his sister. “Your Highness, no matter how fond you are of Charlotte, you mustn’t spoil her so. It embarrasses me to say this, but we have enough trouble with that at home as it is.”

That was an understatement. In fact, the matter of Charlotte’s education had given the whole Martino household quite a challenge. Up until recently, Charlotte had cherry-picked traits from the model of her perfect older sister to suit her needs, but now her cover was thoroughly blown. It was enough to make even Benjamin, he who had refused to wait for Charlotte’s baptism before transferring all his hopes to her, lament and wish he’d brought her up in a different manner. She had the same darling personality of old, but dark clouds appeared to be on the horizon of Charlotte’s character.

“Really now?” Asbert asked. “Charlotte, you’d best go off to Lady Anne’s at once.”

“Aww!” Charlotte whined. “No way, Your Highness.” She pouted, upset that no one had believed her claim, before flouncing out.

Oscar checked to make sure she had indeed set off in the direction of the royal chapel before turning back to the prince. “I’m presently wrapping up the matter we’ve spoken of previously,” he informed Asbert.

“Fine work. That said, I’m afraid I’m terribly busy right now, yet I would still love to attend to it as soon as possible. I should be able to grant it my approval as early as next week.”

A mountain of papers crowded Asbert’s desk, for he normally lived at the dormitories and could only return to the palace on the weekends. Even with a reduced workload in order to let him prioritize his studies, Asbert still gave off the impression of being quite the busy young man to Oscar. *I suppose I’ll have to take care of Claire’s document myself after all*, Oscar thought.

As he made to depart, Asbert called out to him. “Do you not have anything else that needs my approval? What about that document you are carrying?”

“Oh, do you mean this?” Oscar asked. “Do not worry about it, Your Highness. You are busy enough. It is a request from Claire, but I can handle it myself.”

The moment Oscar mentioned Claire’s name, Asbert’s entire demeanor changed—not to anything serious, but instead to something lighthearted and peach-colored. “Let me see,” he commanded.

“She wishes to employ a guard in Paffuto under the Martino family name,” Asbert mused as he read it over. “He is an excellent young man, but he has a troubled background which makes him ill-thought-of in Paffuto. She wants to offer him our support.” He hesitated momentarily before continuing. “I have no issue with Claire’s choice in personnel, do you? Ah, I see not. You thought it’d be best to offer the support of the royal family in addition to the Martinos.”

He grabbed a pen and began drafting a document.

“Your Highness,” Oscar protested. “You are already otherwise occupied. Whatever are you—”

“I am writing her a letter of reference,” Asbert explained. “It’ll be done at once, so be patient.”

Oscar was shocked into silence, and Salomon sighed.

In this manner, the contract between Dion and the Martino family was drawn up with unprecedented speed and sent back off to Claire.

In the meantime, Charlotte did not set off straight to Anne’s after being shooed out of Asbert’s office. She instead loitered in the courtyard and grumbled, “What’s the point of lessons anyway? It’s not like I’ll ever be the same as oh-so-perfect Claire!”

Heedless of the stares of anyone else around her, Charlotte kicked a nearby tree. She would gladly do anything to bring down a rival, but she detested putting in effort for the everyday things.

That spring, when Charlotte had joined the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy while sitting pretty as the crown prince’s fiancée, she’d gone about doing whatever she pleased. She had also been granted the finest suite of rooms in the whole dormitory from the moment she began attending. The icing on the cake was when the student council, notorious for accepting only the most refined young lords and ladies, accepted her without the slightest fuss.

Charlotte should have been perfectly pleased with herself, and yet every single one of these things was a hand-me-down from Claire. Charlotte had longed for this fairy-tale life ever since she was a little girl, but now that it was hers, something still felt lacking. Everywhere she went, she was reminded of all the good Claire had done. For Charlotte—who did not doubt once that she was the center of the universe—it was downright disconcerting.

“First, the letter was gone,” Charlotte complained. “And now forget Leo, but even *Oscar* won’t take my side any longer! What in the world is going on?”

Now that she’d so easily obtained her most ambitious goal of a princely fiancé, Charlotte’s inner wickedness had lost sight of where to go next. Charlotte was well aware her own excellence would be more prominent if not for the dichotomy between serious, dignified Claire and delicate, waifish Charlotte. *And on top of all that*, she thought, *I’m the heroine of this world.* Me!

So I should be allowed to have everything! Without that, what's left for me?!

Charlotte crushed a fallen autumn leaf on the ground beneath her heel and muttered, "Everything will change once I receive my magic. Oh yes, my fifteenth birthday can't come soon enough."

"Keith, what are your thoughts on it?" Vik asked.

Keith knew full well what Vik meant but feigned ignorance and asked, "What do you mean by 'it,' Vik?"

"The whole..." Vik began.

"Crying with Miss Claire in your arms thing, perhaps?"

"She was not 'in my arms,'" Vik insisted. "I didn't hug her back."

Amused, Keith refused to let Vik off the hook. "Really now? Are you sure, Your Highness?"

Vik turned red and glared at his older friend. "That's not the issue, and you know it."

"My apologies," Keith said, recognizing that he'd gone too far with his jokes. He apologetically returned to his typical expression. "I was only rather surprised to see you in such an irregular state."

Vik reflected back on the night when Oswald had left Paffuto. Yes, after calming down from his feelings over his older brother, he had indeed noticed Claire crying and wanted to embrace her. Naturally, the fact that he resisted the urge wasn't the issue. It was that Keith and the other knights had chosen that as the exact moment to walk in, making for some rather awkward tension. Vik thanked his lucky stars he hadn't moved to embrace Claire after all.

However, what bothered Vik came before all that. Vik had precious few people to whom he could forget his station and bare his heart, and his royal parents were much too busy to speak with him about personal matters save for on rare occasions. He had once trusted his nursemaid, but he'd lost the opportunity to confide in her once he was eight years old. Keith, Lui, and Denis were all fine friends, but they were first and foremost his knights and retainers.

Even the young sons and daughters of nobility that Vik had known since his childhood were conscious of the differences in their positions.

On the other hand, even though Claire was the daughter of a duke and a member of a prestigious branch family of a neighboring country's royal family, she viewed him in a way that was different from all the rest. *Looking back on it*, Vik thought, *she attracted my attention from the moment I first met her on Lindel Island*. She carried herself with pride, took great consideration for how she affected her surroundings, and yet she did not seem perturbed in the slightest no matter how familiarly Vik interacted with her. Surely this must've been due to their relationship in Claire's first life. If she truly did empathize with him without any calculated self-interest on her part, then nothing else could fill Vik with greater happiness.

"When we first met," Vik said, "I remember thinking she was only a bright, funny girl who wasn't afraid to speak her mind or walk on the beach barefoot."

"Claire is a fine young woman indeed," Keith remarked. "Perhaps an enga—"

Vik interrupted before Keith could finish the word. "I asked Claire about that earlier. Apparently, in her first life, I took her to the hill overlooking Wurtz."

Keith's eyes opened wide. "Wow," he said. He understood that the hill where Claire and Vik had overlooked the town's nightscape was a place that Vik had treasured ever since he was a young child.

"I never thought the day would come in which I'd be jealous of myself," Vik admitted.

"Indeed," said Keith. "Still, no matter how kindhearted she is, or what sort of special relationship you two had in her first life, I find it odd she would be so attached to you that she would forget herself and cry for you. It has only been half a year since you've met, after all."

"Yes, I certainly found it odd too," Vik agreed. "I wonder if she'll talk to me about it."

"So, what's the plan?" Dion asked. "Don't you have to tell His Highness about what's going to happen in the future? I don't know much about it since I wasn't

there, but it definitely sounds pretty nasty.”

Claire clutched her head in consternation. “I want to talk to him as soon as I can,” she said. “But I don’t know how best to broach the subject.”

Dion had officially been Claire’s guard for one week now, and the two had fallen into the daily habit of meeting in Claire’s room after dinner to talk like this. During the contracting process, she had prioritized his freedom above all else. Apart from accompanying her anytime she went out save for her daily trips to and from school, Dion was free to do as he pleased. However, he showed no sign of wanting to go anywhere. He usually waited for her in the entryway anytime she was at home and tripped along at her heels, smiling all the while, whenever she went out to the palace library or any other such place. In Claire’s eyes, she saw this as gratitude—to Vik, not herself—for saving his life.

“In your first life, you worked as a governess for the Reines, didn’t you, Claire?” Dion asked.

“Yes, I did,” she said.

“And didn’t you say His Highness came to visit you there? You must have been quite close.”

“We were.”

“Well, that fact alone points to a pretty special feeling, doesn’t it?” Dion pointed out. “I wonder if His Highness hasn’t begun to feel the same way now.”

“Well,” Claire began, “I wouldn’t go so far as to say that—”

Just then, a knocking noise interrupted her. Claire’s shoulders twitched at the sudden sound. Someone was knocking, yes, but not on the door leading out to the entrance.

Suddenly serious, Dion rose. “Go into the other room, Claire,” he commanded.

“But—” she protested.

“Go!”

“But I think I know who this could be,” she insisted.

Resigned to the fact that Claire refused to go anywhere, Dion drew back the curtain with an oddly stern expression only to find—

“Vik,” Claire breathed. It was the very man she had entertained the hope of seeing, however faintly.

“Why is Dion here?” he asked. “Don’t tell me you two conduct your briefing meetings for the next day in Claire’s bedchambers at night.”

Blind to the fact that he was the pot calling the kettle black in terms of dropping in at unconventional times, Vik failed to hide his displeasure at finding another young man in Claire’s room at night.

Dion grinned foolishly. “I’m no good at handling anything this complicated. Well! I guess I’d better take my leave now. Have fun, you two.”

Dion tried to slip away, but Claire grabbed his arm with an iron grip. “Can’t you stay just a moment longer, Dion?” she pleaded. She was desperate, for she hadn’t been alone face-to-face with Vik since the night of Oswald’s departure.

“Well, fine,” Dion said. “Then, I guess I’ll just have to step out and go make some tea! Would you care for some wine as well, Your Highness?”

“Either works,” Vik said. “Now go take your time making that tea.”

“Will do!”

Dion fled, succumbing to the pressure from Vik. Claire just *knew* his loyalty was to Vik all along.

She directed Vik to take a seat on the sofa, and he did so. This was his second time coming to her room in the detached palace, and the previous occurrence had only been an unexpected visit that had morphed out of him escorting her home.

Claire guessed that he must have come here on some urgent business and could not relax. Unwilling to wait for him to speak, she asked first, “At any rate, why on earth did you come through the window?”

“Well, it’d have caused all sorts of a fuss if I’d made you receive me the normal way at this time of night, wouldn’t it?” Vik said.

“Goodness, this brings me back,” she chuckled.

He looked at her in confusion. *Well, he is still Vik, after all*, she thought. Giggling to herself, she met Vik's eyes as he looked at her in slight bewilderment. The deep jade green of his eyes was extraordinarily handsome. What with the way they were looking at each other, Claire felt that at any moment they'd broach the topic of that other night.

"I came because I wanted to see you," Vik admitted.

Claire turned bright red in shock as his words caught her completely off guard. Vik noticed Claire's reaction, and the two fell silent for a moment.

Finally, Vik said hesitantly, "I see that you and Dion are getting along well."

"Y-Yes, we are," said Claire. "I can turn to him for all sorts of things, so he's been a great help to me."

"Really now? You turn to him?"

Vik's eyes were as kindly as ever, but Claire saw in them something that did not seem fully happy with her explanation.

Vik hesitated again before saying, "I've been meaning to thank you for handling Dion's situation. I'm sorry you had to make up for my lack of ability there."

"What are you talking about?" Claire asked. "I was the one who wanted to have Dion stay here. You have nothing to be sorry for."

"Right." Vik paused again. "By the way, I heard that Dion's contract came with a rather long letter from Prince Asbert."

"Lui told you, didn't she?"

Claire giggled, relieved that the conversation had now headed off on a different tack. The contract from Oscar had also come with a letter of a recommendation and an additional letter addressed to Claire herself, both courtesy of Asbert. In the latter, he explained in good detail Charlotte's current circumstances, and from that, Claire judged Asbert was doing as she'd asked of him. The letter itself had indeed appeared lengthy, but it was only because Asbert had also snuck a present of floral stationery and envelopes along as a gift. Claire recalled Lui looking at the letter, the gifts, and Claire in turn before

muttering, “Oh, brother.”

“The letter wasn’t actually that long,” Claire explained, “and there wasn’t anything particularly important in it. It was mostly an explanation of how things are going for my sister, as I had asked him to send me.”

Vik hesitated before saying, “Was it really? It’s clear that His Highness Asbert thinks...” He trailed off.

“The envelope and stationery were left over from a present given to my sister,” Claire insisted firmly, seeing that Vik had made some sort of erroneous assumption. She did not want him to have the wrong idea.

Sitting across from Vik like this and meeting at night felt just like old times. The Vik sitting before her right now, Claire thought, possessed none of the sternness of the crown prince. As she watched his relaxed, gentle smile, Claire happened to think, *I wonder if now would be a good time to talk about what events Charlotte caused in the future.*

“Vik,” Claire said. “Do you think you could gather everyone here? I would like to explain why I chose to embark on my second life.”

Vik smiled at her gently. “Are you willing to tell us that?”

Claire nodded.

The retainers wasted no time in assembling within Claire’s rooms.

“My apologies for asking you to come here all of a sudden,” Claire said. “I have something I’d like to tell you.”

“Sure,” said Lui. “We’ve been waiting to hear it.”

Lui’s immediate agreement felt encouraging to Claire. “Thank you for believing me earlier when I told you about my first life,” she began. “I hadn’t the courage then to tell you the whole story.” She faltered but then continued her story. “But the true reason I decided to redo my life was to prevent the relationship between Paffuto and my homeland, Noston, from deteriorating.”

Vik, formerly reclining against the back of the couch, now leaned forward. “What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“In my first life, I fled Noston when I failed to receive the appropriate magic to meet expectations. I happened to accidentally receive my true magic on Lindel Island, whereupon I came to live in the home of a baron in Paffuto as a governess while attending the Royal Academy. Later, I accompanied a Paffish delegation visiting Noston.”

“I see,” said Vik. “That would have made it your first time returning home since you’d earned your true magic, right?”

“Correct. Once the king and my lord father learned that I did have power befitting my family’s name, they forbade me to leave Noston. However, I refused to stay. As a result, the relationship between Paffuto and Noston took a terrible blow.”

“And that was the tragic event you mentioned?” Vik asked.

Claire hesitated before admitting, “It was.”

She could not bring herself to mention the fact of their engagement; however, the story could not be properly recounted while leaving out this detail. That was because, for all the power and influence Paffuto possessed, it was unheard of for even the strongest and most useful of mages to single-handedly tip the scales in its international relations.

“I think I have a good overall impression of the story,” Vik said. He tapped his index finger on his knee. From that action alone, Claire guessed what his next question would be.

“What was your relation to me at the time?” he asked. It was as she’d expected, and yet she felt it was far too direct. He had to have known the answer, but she looked away from him all the same.

Falteringly, she admitted, “I believe we were closer than we are now.”

Vik’s eyes opened momentarily before he returned to his former collectedness. “I see,” he said. That answer was evidently all he needed.

Lui exchanged looks with Keith and then asked, “And what else happened?”

Claire hesitated to continue, although she knew she could not afford to hide anything if she wished to prevent this tragic future. Besides, this was Lui, after

all. She'd probably already long since guessed the truth from Claire's recount.

"As a result of my sister's white magic," Claire explained to them all after a pause, "Lui was gravely injured."

Lui's facial expression did not change once, but Claire could feel all her friends tense up. "I see," Lui said.

"I am here right now in order to change the future," Claire said. "However, frankly speaking, I fear that the scope is much too large. I cannot change it alone; hence, I would like to ask for everyone else's assistance."

As Claire bowed to them meekly, she stole a glance at Vik's face. He looked back at her with confidence.

"That's fine by us," he said. "Relax. We will help in any way that we can. After all, this problem affects Paffuto as well."

"But why don't we simply hide Claire's magic from Noston?" Keith mused, puzzled. "So long as we act normal, I see no reason for the secret to ever get out."

"That's because in a year from now," Claire answered, "there will be signs of a forming magical tornado, the worst ever in history, and I will be the one to purify it. None but the eldest daughter of the Martino family could accomplish such a thing, and so even if I attempt to hide it, I'm sure the secret will slip out."

Lui's eyes widened in shock. "You can purify a magical tornado?"

"You mean we're *getting* a magical tornado?" Keith spluttered.

"Properly speaking," Claire explained soothingly, "it won't actually form. I will be able to stop it while we still only have an omen of it."

"But in that case," Denis pointed out, "I figure it'd be better to not hide it and instead work on creating a bit of a friendly relationship with Noston now, right? And then we can tell them that in good conditions we'll keep Claire all to ourselves — Ow!"

Lui, reading the deep implications of the latter portion of this comment, had trod on Denis's toes. Vik, meanwhile, appeared to be engrossed in thought. However, none of Claire's friends showed any sign of wanting to send her back

to Noston against her will. *Perhaps I really can stay here*, she thought.

After a time, Vik spoke up. "I've been considering this for a while now, but I wonder if it might be best to set up a portal."

Holding back her joy at Vik's suggestion, Claire raised her head. "What is a portal?" she asked.

"That'd be great!" Denis cried. "Then we can go kick back in Tillard too! Nostonian girls, here we come!"

Lui glared icy daggers at Denis. "Quit wasting the court mages' time on such nonsense."

Then, as Claire watched the conversation with an uncomprehending expression, Lui explained for her benefit, "A portal is a starting and ending point for teleportation magic. It takes enormous amounts of time and effort to construct one, but once it is complete, coming and going through it becomes easy. Well, I say easy, but to go between Wurtz and Tillard would still require about a day's worth of power for someone with blue magic."

"That sounds so convenient," Claire said.

"However, there are many weaknesses in terms of security, so none have ever set up a portal across kingdom borders before," Vik added. "Still, if we were to make one in this case, then we could give Noston a sense of security with the promise that they'd be able to call you home in case of an emergency."

"True," said Keith. He held his head in his hands. "But it'd be challenging to get this idea to pass in the senate."

"Yes, but it won't be impossible," said Vik. "Naturally, we'll use some other pretext apart from you, Claire. Still, we also need to consider what timescale would work for you. Are you all right with waiting just a little longer?"

"Yes, of course," Claire said. "Thank you very much, all of you."

She'd been frightened to recount the events which had led to her going back in time for reasons apart from the awkwardness of it being known that Vik was her fiancé. She had been afraid they would tell her to cut her stay in Paffuto short and return home. Rather, Claire considered, perhaps it was more that she

feared her friends cared for her less than she, who trusted them with all her heart, cared for them.

Vik, sitting directly across from Claire, spoke up and said, “At any rate, Claire, the future you’re worried about won’t come to pass on my watch. Have no fear.”

His words moved her. It was just as if those clear eyes of his could see through everything, she thought.

In her previous life, Claire had spent every school day with her dear friend Lydia. At the very beginning, Claire had drawn attention due to being Vik’s friend, but before long, her classmates had acclimated to it and life settled down. However, in this life she was a student from abroad given preferential treatment as an honored guest. Unlike before when she’d been permitted to fade into the background, it was inevitable that whispers now broke out everywhere Claire went.

“I do wish I might at least be allowed to have lunch in peace,” Lydia complained bitterly, completely at odds with her charming expression, during lunchtime in the cafeteria. All the while, nearby students shot silent stares at her.

“I do apologize, Lady Lydia,” Claire said, her face falling. “Even I—”

“Oh, no,” said Lydia. She rushed to refute Claire. “I don’t mean you; I like you.”

The reason the whispering was especially loud today was because Vik had joined them for lunch. Ever since just before summer vacation, Vik had taken to inviting them for lunch more and more frequently. These days, Claire ate with him practically every day for some reason she did not know. Given their current relationship, she knew it was only appropriate for her to politely decline his offer, but whenever Vik invited Claire to come eat, Lydia answered for her with a smile and a, “We’ll be there.”

Claire remembered full well from her first life how her friend preferred to live a quiet life and therefore felt terribly guilty.

“What I’m concerned about are the other girls,” Lydia began to explain. “As a young noblewoman, I find them more—”

Just then, a voice drowned her out. “What do you think you’re doing?” someone cried. “Can’t you see you’re bothering Vikky?”

The owner of the voice was none other than the king’s niece, Vik’s cousin Nicola. Her springy caramel-colored hair was done up in two pigtails, and her eyes, normally round and cute, now glared at Claire. While Nicola was a year behind Vik in school, she took it upon herself to pop up wherever he went and shoo away any girls who might try to get close to him.

“Listen,” she snapped, “Vikky is the crown prince. Do you really think you’re fit to ogle him? You’re supposed to be dignified noblewomen! Act like it!”

“Nicola, choose your words more carefully,” Vik snapped.

When Nicola’s posse noticed the frown on his face, they realized their error and scattered in consternation. Only Nicola and her kindest friends remained standing in the now-empty space where their classmates once were.

“You’re far too kind to them, Vikky,” Nicola said. “But on that note, how about I join you for lunch?”

“Sorry,” said Vik, “I just finished. Also, did you hear the news?”

The twinkle in Nicola’s eyes immediately darkened. “Yes,” she admitted.

“You don’t need to rush to give me your answer. Take your time and think it over.”

All the fight immediately went out of Nicola, and Vik patted her head kindly before standing up. At that cue, Lydia and Claire likewise rose and, with a slight bow to Nicola, departed the cafeteria. *It’s odd to see Nicola so dejected after Vik speaking to her,* Claire thought. *I wonder if something has happened.*

Her impression of Nicola had completely reversed itself. In Claire’s first life, Nicola had been a conspicuously headstrong young girl but still rather cute; one couldn’t hate her. However, this time Nicola left Claire with a completely different, more favorable impression. Her strong affection for her cousin still led her to act up, but Nicola was undeniably a member of the royal family—a high-

achieving student and well-mannered young lady at heart. In fact, even while she presented a thorny front to Claire, her manners towards this honored guest from another kingdom were in no way lacking.

As the group of friends set off towards the lecture hall for their afternoon classes, Lydia sighed. “Your Highness is correct,” she said. “I would think rather more of Lady Nicola if she only paid more attention to her choice of words. She’s ever so fun to watch, if rather pitiful.”

Claire nodded. “Yes, I agree. After all, she was only trying to help Your Highness just now, wasn’t she?”

“Claire, you once mentioned that the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy has a student council, yes? They must do a better job of governing themselves than we do here,” Vik said.

“Oh, yes, we did have that. We students had full autonomy to govern ourselves, and the school functioned just like a miniature version of high society. Your Highness, I know you worried that I might find this school too strict, but compared to Noston’s Academy, the level of freedom here is truly lovely.”

At that point, Claire realized that this bordered on a story from her first life, and she held her tongue.

Lydia’s eyes grew wide. “Our school is so focused on studying and research. So there really is such a large difference between these two academies, is there?”

When Claire had still attended the Academy in Noston, not a day had gone by when she hadn’t been made aware of her status as a Martino and as Asbert’s fiancée. Seeing Nicola here at this relatively freer school, still only fourteen years old and yet burdened with a similar sense of duty, made Claire want to help lift some of the burden off the girl’s shoulders. Yet whenever she saw Nicola gleefully shooing all the other girls away from Vik, she changed her mind once more. Maybe Nicola was doing just fine after all.

Chapter 8

Autumn advanced and, by the time Claire noticed, signs pointed to winter being on the way. As Vik bustled about in order to set up the portal, Claire received a slightly concerning letter from her aunt. It reported that Charlotte rarely showed up for her lessons. Claire had also kept up her correspondence with Charlotte, but much to Claire's bewilderment, all of Charlotte's responses were filled with fun anecdotes about her daily life at school or time with Asbert. *I certainly didn't expect this to be easy, but all the same, this is worrisome*, she thought. *I wonder if Charlotte will be all right.*

"Miss Claire," Sophie said, interrupting her reverie, "His Highness has sent you an invitation."

"Oh, has it arrived?" Claire asked. She left off thinking about Charlotte and took the envelope. It contained her invitation to Vik's sixteenth birthday ball. The other day, Claire had helped Lui in sending out the invitations. She'd found the process enjoyable, from choosing the envelopes to making a guest list and deciding what to write in the invitations themselves. To make matters more exciting, Claire's heart skipped a beat when she discovered, much to her surprise, that all the envelopes Lui had chosen matched the color of Vik's eyes.

Just imagine if everything goes well, Claire thought, *and then I really am able to work in the palace.* She wished for this to happen with all her heart.

Incidentally, while Claire and Vik were now as close friends as they had been in her first life, their relationship had not made any further developments. Apart from the hug during Claire's infiltration of the Meads' villa and the incident the night after Oswald left Paffuto, the two hadn't so much as touched one another.

As luck would have it, the upcoming ball was to be Claire's first since coming to Paffuto. In contrast to her gloom and anxiety surrounding the ball held to search for Vik's bride in her first life, this was to be a much more lighthearted affair. She even looked forward to it with excitement.

“His Highness’s birthday is almost here,” Sophie remarked. “What sort of dress should we have made for you, Miss?”

“It’s Vik’s ball, not mine,” Claire protested with a smile. “There’s no need to have a new one made up for me.”

“Maybe so,” Sophie conceded, “but this is a special occasion! A ball, Miss!”

Claire could hear an unspoken, “It’d be letting all your good looks go to waste, Miss,” as Sophie withdrew.

After she had gone, Claire opened a drawer in the desk at one corner of her room to put away the letter. She wanted to treasure this memento of her first job well done.

Yet as she did so, a light pink envelope already tucked away inside the drawer caught her eye. *Oh, my mother’s letter*, Claire thought. She’d brought it along with her in her trunk when she left the Martino mansion. Periodically, she took it out and reread this treasured possession. The neat handwriting reminded her of her late mother wishing her happiness.

Claire took the pink envelope and unfolded it on the table. Something possessed her to lay the seafoam-green envelope next to it and compare it side by side to Vik’s party invitation.

“I’m sure my mother had no idea when she wrote this that I would someday be the assistant of the future king of Paffuto,” she told herself. Atypical as it was, Claire felt in the mood for someone to be proud of her. Her own sense of accomplishment embarrassed her, so she turned her mind to her mother, who lived on in her memory. Claire had read the letter many times before, but this was her first time seeing it with a sense of pride.

Just then, she felt the slight sensation that something was off. “Hmm?” she said to herself. Both letters were written on the same sort of soft, high-quality paper, but something seemed incongruous about her mother’s letter. *Was something else written on the same page?* Claire thought. The incongruity came from a second set of handwriting over the top of which Claire’s mother must have written more than ten years prior. *What sort of letter did my mother write?* she wondered.

Curious, she tried angling the page a different way and holding it up to the light. She could just pick out, ever so faintly, several words. “I want to...take her...custody...” Claire read. *Who is this “her” she speaks of?* Claire thought. “Is she referring to Charlotte?”

Once she’d voiced it, she could not think otherwise. To the best of Claire’s knowledge, Charlotte had come to live with the Martinos when her mother had passed away in an epidemic that swept the kingdom. As Claire hadn’t even known Charlotte existed before this, the fact that Claire’s mother wanted to adopt her was news to Claire.

“What on earth does this mean?” she wondered aloud. “Who is this addressed to?”

She concentrated on the faint writing. *It looks like it says Florence*, Claire thought. “Perhaps this was originally a letter to my grandmother.” If that were true, it meant that at the very least Claire’s parents and grandmother knew about Charlotte, and preparations were already underway for them to adopt Charlotte as their daughter. However, Claire’s mother had passed away, and Charlotte hadn’t come to live with them until she’d lost her home in Paffuto. *When Charlotte came to live with us*, Claire thought, *she was too little to even fend for herself.*

Claire dug through her hazy early childhood memories of Charlotte. Charlotte had looked so small and skinny that Claire could hardly believe she was only a year younger. With the way Charlotte smiled so innocently, the whole household quickly fell in love with her, but for some reason, Claire felt that her grandmother had kept Charlotte at a distance. Grandma Florence only ever read picture books or told fairy tales to Claire, either alone or with her brothers; Charlotte was never invited to join in. Oscar had informed her that Charlotte was the product of Benjamin’s affair, so it was only to be expected. The immediate family, he insisted, only had to be nicer to her to make up for it.

At the time, Claire had readily accepted this explanation, yet as she looked back on it carefully now, it struck her as extremely odd that her grandmother, so warm and kind to everyone else, would keep Charlotte at arm’s length. “I wonder if Grandma knew something about her,” Claire mused.

Charlotte had directed white magic at Claire and Vik on the night of the ball in her first life. Just the thought of it alone made Claire's heart ache.

"Perhaps if I ask Aunt Anne, I might learn something," Claire said.

She wasted no time before picking up her pen and, without revealing the existence of her mother's letter, wrote a message asking for the history of Charlotte's adoption. She also made a casual mention of her grandmother's behavior around Charlotte. Claire had a feeling that her aunt would pick up what Claire meant but did not voice outright in her letter.

Truthfully, Claire wished to go and meet Anne in person, but she had no other means of getting there apart from teleporting on her own. Yet, she judged, it was still too much of a risk to take for fear of anyone but Anne seeing her in Noston.

Once she'd sent off the letter, Claire opened her drawer once more and removed a new pack of stationery and an envelope. She'd purchased both on her last trip into town. With its multivarious colored gems and delicate lace against a salmon-pink background, Claire thought the paper suited Charlotte perfectly. Like always, she began to write a report of her usual activities to her sister. No reply had come for quite some time.

Nicola Windsor, youngest daughter of the highest-ranking duke of Paffuto, was at a loss for what to do.

Duke Windsor, her father and the king's younger brother, peered at his daughter's face as she sat at the table. "We're all concerned for you, Nicola, as you've not been yourself lately," he told her. His heart ached to see his adorable little daughter looking so sad.

"Oh, father," she said. "In that case, maybe you should get cracking on setting up my engagement with Vikky!" To avoid her real concern, Nicola phrased it like a joke; although, she did indeed mean it half-seriously.

"I wish I could make every one of your dreams come true," said the duke, "but that cannot be done. His Highness is your cousin."

"Hmmp!" she whined. "But no one stopped me when I was little and swore

I'd be Vikky's bride."

"Well," the duke reasoned, "you were a child, and we all understood that it was only a silly fantasy."

Although Duke Windsor clearly opposed her plea, inside his mind was torn. For her part, Nicola was more concerned about the reputation of this duke's daughter from another kingdom, this Claire Martino girl. Claire always accompanied Vik at school, and while this was not public knowledge, Nicola had heard that Claire had worked undercover during the time of the Mead and Rioux plot.

Nicola didn't actually harbor any sort of romantic feelings for Vik. However, the thought of having her long-beloved older cousin's heart stolen by some random woman disgusted her. It gave Nicola quite a shock—even though the two seemed to be dragging their feet on the matter—that Vik now looked at Claire with a warmth in his eyes, the likes of which Nicola had never seen before. Nicola's true desire, then, was to do something before Vik became any closer to that girl.

"By the way," Duke Windsor remarked, "I hear that His Highness is quite fond of the young lady from Noston."

Nicola did not respond to that. She only puffed her cheeks in irritation as her father poured salt in the wound.

"More importantly, what do you think about the suggestion you received from the prince? He said you could wait until after your baptism. Yet as far as I am aware, you still have not given him your answer, have you? I thought you were the one who wanted this to begin with, Nicola."

"Well, yes, but..." Nicola faltered. "Please let me have more time to think about it, father!" She rose from her seat and exited the room. As she closed the door, she could hear her father sigh behind her.

Even I'm at a loss for what to do! Nicola thought. Previously, she had begged her father to be allowed to study abroad at the Noston Royal Aristocratic Academy. She aspired to take up a position enabling her to support Vik in the future, and for that, she wanted experience in another kingdom. However, her plan had fizzled out when her doting parents and the royal family alike had

raised vehement objections to the idea. Yet recently, this proposal had resurfaced. Nicola assumed it was for some political reason. Her curiosity about studying apart from her parents struggled against her desires to stay near Vik and fulfill her duty as a future duchess, until she had no idea what to do.

I can't put off giving my response forever, she thought. But I'm in no state to make a proper decision now!

Practically every noble in the kingdom attended Vik's sixteenth birthday ball. Claire's eyes twinkled as she looked out from the balcony over the crowd of well-dressed guests mingling in the gaily decorated ballroom.

"Why, Lui, this is incredible," she gushed. "I had many chances to attend galas in Noston, but this is my first time seeing so many people in one place!"

"Yes," said Lui. "Vik is the crown prince, after all. Were it not for the Decennial Ceremony, this would be the biggest event of the year."

Dion was not in attendance tonight. There was no issue with Claire bringing along a guard in and of itself, but Dion was recognizable as the former heir of the Meads, and so he had firmly declined to attend on the pretext that it would be inappropriate for the party. Therefore, Vik, worried about this being Claire's first ball in Paffuto, had assigned Lui to her.

Claire saw Vik far off in the distance surrounded by a throng of guests. She wanted to wish him a happy birthday, but that was clearly impossible at the moment. *I'll wish him happy birthday later, she thought. For now, I'll enjoy this special occasion from up here.*

Just then, Claire heard a familiar voice call her name, and she turned to see Lydia.

"Lady Lydia!" Claire cried. "I didn't think I'd have the pleasure of seeing you tonight."

"Yes, there's quite the crowd, isn't there?" agreed Lydia. "But I'd always find you right away, no matter where you are."

Standing at Claire's side, Lui greeted Lydia and added, "It has been far too long, my lady."

“S-Sir Lui,” Lydia stuttered. “Yes, it has!” Lui was well renowned among the young noblewomen for her status as a female knight, and she had many fans. Likewise, as a member of a family with strong magic and ties to the church, Lydia idolized Lui and now adopted a nervous expression before her.

“I’m afraid,” Lui continued, “it will be rather challenging for His Highness to come around and greet you, my lady. My apologies, but I do hope you’ll enjoy the party regardless.”

“Oh, there is no need at all for that, Sir Lui,” Lydia insisted. “I see His Highness every day at school as is.”

Claire noticed several young ladies in the distance eyeing her and Lydia, the latter’s eyes glowing at having this opportunity to talk to Lui.

It wouldn’t do to stand out too much, Claire thought. I’ve already met with Lydia, so it’d be best if I let Lui go back to Vik’s side.

Just then, another voice interrupted her thoughts. “Lady Claire Martino,” it said. “A pleasure to meet you here this evening.”

It was Nicola, accompanied by a group of kind-looking friends. Even though Nicola seemed to do whatever she pleased unchecked, her friends always appeared to enjoy clustering around her. This, too, was one of the reasons why Claire liked Nicola.

“Lady Nicola,” she said, “It’s a pleasure to see you as well.”

“A-Across the way,” Nicola began.

“Yes?”

“A-A-Across the way and behind the curtain, there is a table set up for tea,” Nicola said.

“Oh?”

Nicola remained silent, and Claire did the same. It took well over three seconds for her to realize that Nicola was inviting her to take tea with her.

Lui, catching on before Claire did, said, “Why, then you should go, Claire. At any rate, you certainly won’t have the opportunity to speak to Vik tonight.”

“Yes, but...” Claire protested.

“Miss Lydia will be safe with me,” Lui promised.

“Thank you, Lui.” With that encouragement, Claire turned back to Nicola.

“Lady Nicola, I am honored to accept your invitation.”

Nicola made an odd, embarrassed frown and blushed. “Right this way, if you’d please,” she said after a moment.

Lydia stood behind Lui, making a worried expression, but Claire didn’t sense any malicious intent in this invitation.

Nicola led Claire to a small booth-like space in the shadow of a pillar located on the edge of the ballroom and closed a heavy curtain behind her. Falteringly, she said, “Pardon me, but I wonder if you would be so kind as to not tell anyone about this meeting.”

Claire said nothing. She took a nonchalant look about the booth. As neither servants nor Nicola’s friends had followed them inside, the two girls were completely alone. In front of a rather large couch, presumably brought in from elsewhere in the palace, there stood a teapot and a lovely array of snacks. In addition to the cookies and scones typical of such functions, there were also buttery pancakes with maple syrup—Claire’s favorite. Nicola’s attitude and manner of inviting her were both quite unfriendly, but Claire recognized that the girl had given this tea party her utmost effort.

“Why, but of course,” Claire responded. “I promise I won’t tell a soul.” A rush of affection for Nicola suddenly struck her, and she broke out into a smile.

“Wh-What are you smiling about?” Nicola snapped.

“My apologies, Lady Nicola. Was there something you wished to talk to me about?”

Lacking any servants, Claire went to pour her own tea, but Nicola snatched the teapot away from her. With an elegance that defied her odd behavior and bright red face, Nicola poured a cup for Claire and then said, as if it was second nature for her, “We may switch cups now, if you’d like.”

Yet Claire could not possibly imagine that this innocent-looking girl, now working so hard to put up an act of bravado, would do anything to harm her.

“That won’t be necessary, Lady Nicola,” she said.

Nicola started. “L-Lady Claire, you are quite odd.”

“And you, my lady, are very sweet.”

“Wha—!” Nicola spluttered, wide-eyed and blushing.

Claire paid her no mind and sipped the tea. “This tastes wonderful,” she said. “I enjoy the fragrance of these tea leaves too.”

Nicola must’ve asked someone about Claire’s preferences for tea, in addition to the sweets, and sent away for it accordingly. *It turns out Nicola is exactly the person I thought she was*, Claire told herself with a smile.

Nicola looked rather embarrassed. A silence stretched on between the two for several moments until she finally opened her mouth and asked, “Lady Claire, you spent a year at the Royal Aristocratic Academy in Noston, didn’t you?”

“Yes, indeed I did,” Claire responded.

Nicola, always so condescending and overly confident, now asked shyly, “Might I inquire what sort of place it was?”

“If I were to compare it to the Royal Academy of Paffuto,” Claire said, “I believe that the largest difference is that the dorm life makes it a perfect microcosm of high society.”

Even as Claire answered, Nicola did not seem to know what to ask next. “That’s interesting,” she remarked. “So you say it focuses more on social experiences than academics, is that correct? If I were to transfer there, how do you think it might turn out for me?”

“That’s a good question,” Claire said. “To begin with, Noston’s Academy has a student council. Presently, the crown prince, Asbert, attends the school, so the council is organized with him as its head. Since you are royalty as well, I assume you will need to take up the position as his second-in-command.”

While both schools were erected to educate young noblemen and women, having attended each, Claire could see clear differences between them. Every

area of the Paffish Academy's academics were top-notch, whereas Noston's Academy prioritized furthering relations with fellow students for the sake of future politics and estate management. *Both schools have their own interesting characteristics*, Claire thought. *I can't say that one is better than the other across the board.*

As she delivered her thoughts, Claire thought she saw a faint flicker in Nicola's eyes.

"In terms of academics," Claire went on, "Paffuto's Academy has a clear lead. I believe you have no cause for worry about falling behind in the material, Lady Nicola."

Nicola hesitated momentarily before saying, "I see."

As they talked, Claire became more and more convinced that this had to do with the portal. In terms of which country would be more likely to oppose installing a portal, she didn't even have to think before pointing to Noston. As incredulous as it was, if Paffuto were to use the portal as a means to launch an inside invasion on Noston, then Noston would lack the means to protect itself. However, even without the portal, Paffuto and Noston still had the same basic power dynamic. Whenever possible, it was best for the smaller kingdom to accept Paffuto's suggestions and create an amicable relationship. Nicola, then, must have been selected for this task, Claire surmised. Sending her to study abroad in Noston created a pretext to build the portal for her sake, thus allowing the plan to come to fruition without causing friction.

But how horrid, Claire thought, her heart sinking, *to sacrifice Nicola just to keep the peace between our two kingdoms.*

"Listen," Nicola snapped. "I don't know what it is you're thinking, but you understand that I don't want to go abroad just because I'm tired of watching whatever's happening between you and Vikky, right?"

"Pardon?" Claire's expression went blank, as her thoughts had gone in an entirely different direction.

"I've wanted to go abroad for ages now," Nicola informed her. "But father wouldn't let me! I want the experience so that I can be helpful to Vikky in the future."

“And that’s why you’re going to study abroad in Noston? Oh, I see now.”

“So long as I stay here, people will always treat me like a princess. Sure, I can study and do research, but I’ll never get experience in anything else.” Now running out of steam, she began to mumble, “And besides, it’s not like I behave myself at the Royal Academy.”

“Forgive me,” Claire said, bowing her head. “I’m afraid I misplaced my concern.”

Nicola didn’t say anything for a moment. “I want to know more about this student council you mentioned,” she finally admitted. “I’m also interested in what it’d be like for the whole student body to live in dormitories together.”

“Certainly, if that is your goal, then I think the system is set up for you to have a lovely experience. The student council even hosts frequent balls and tea parties at the dorms.”

“Really? Oh, I’d love to know more! That sounds like fun!”

Nicola’s embarrassment vanished completely, and her eyes glittered.

“I’ve been a little on the fence about giving up on my dream of studying abroad, considering that I’ve just started at the Royal Academy and have been getting used to life there. But now, knowing that it’s for the good of my kingdom, I’ll be sure to enjoy going abroad even more,” Nicola announced sunnily.

Nicola already made her decision before even talking to me, Claire realized. Still, she must have wanted someone to support her choice. Given that Claire knew much about Noston and wasn’t especially close to Nicola, that made her the most suitable candidate.

With that, Nicola’s plans to study abroad were set in stone.

The next day, Vik dropped by Claire’s room—via the front door, this time—with a displeased frown. “You didn’t come to see me yesterday,” he said.

“But of course not. There were plenty of others who wanted to talk to you, so I didn’t stand a chance of getting near you,” said Claire. “Still, I enjoyed myself

quite a bit. Thank you for inviting me.”

“You and Nicola both, hmm?”

“Oh, so you know about our conversation?”

“Nicola told me she wanted to ask you some questions about her studying abroad. Yet I still can’t believe she decided to snatch you away for that in the middle of my birthday party.”

Claire giggled.

“I intended to introduce you to the king last night,” Vik went on. “But I guess we’ll just have to wait until the next ball.” He paused briefly before saying, “Darn that girl. How far does that scheming of hers go?”

He rested his chin in his hands, looking decidedly unamused. Vik’s casual comment about introducing Claire to the king startled her considerably, but lacking the faintest idea why he should want to do that, all she did was smile.

“I see you didn’t have a new dress made,” Vik said.

“That’s correct.”

“My apologies for neglecting that detail.”

Claire went silent. She couldn’t understand what he meant by this either. Was this a simple apology for not having introduced her to a good tailor patronized by the inhabitants of the castle? Or did it hold some deeper meaning?

Incidentally, in Paffuto, it was all but the expected duty for a gentleman to prepare his fiancée’s dress when attending a ball with her. Clearly, Vik must have put the pieces together and understood something of his relationship with Claire in her first life.

Yet the Vik of her second life was currently relaxed, feeling entirely at home in her rooms. A major event had been checked off the agenda, and the plans to install the portal promised a happy outcome. He smiled at her calmly as she stared into his clear eyes. “What’s that look for?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “Nothing at all.”

Now, just as it had been back then, she felt that Vik’s attention was always

trained directly on her. Yet so long as he didn't say anything, Claire lacked the courage to make any moves of her own. *In terms of the dress comment*, she thought, *I wish it had the latter meaning*. How unlike her, she realized, to be dependent on someone else.

In her second life, she'd come to view Vik as a dear friend. However, Claire knew deep down that she longed to be something different to him, and her cheeks flushed. She looked down at the ground to prevent him from seeing.

Vik checked his watch and then made to rise. "I suppose we can talk about it next time," he said.

"Pardon? Talk about what?"

"The dress. Good night."

He did not grant her enough time to refuse. By the time she'd jerked her head up in surprise at his words, Vik had already left.

Before afternoon lectures began, Lydia turned to Claire in worry. "Lady Claire, what is the matter?" she asked. "I'm afraid you don't look so well."

"I'm fine, thank you," Claire said. "I just didn't sleep too well last night."

Claire's answer hid an enormous fib. She'd barely slept a wink the night before thanks to the implication in Vik's parting words that he'd like to see to the making of her dress for the next ball.

In Paffuto, none but a young lady's parents or fiancé were permitted to see to the duty of preparing a ball gown for her. For Claire, no stranger to this tradition, she couldn't help but take Vik's comment as a sign of courtship. No matter how many times she tried to deny that something so convenient could possibly happen, his words kept coming back to her. She'd kept on replaying them over and over in her head until morning. *I had my head down*, she thought, *so I couldn't see his face and tell what exactly he meant by that*. *However, he didn't sound like he was joking*.

"Really now?" Lydia said. "If you aren't feeling well, perhaps you'd better go home early."

“Thank you for your concern, Lady Lydia. But I’m fine, really.”

Then, Vik popped up from behind Lydia. “You aren’t feeling well, Claire?”

Claire inadvertently turned away as the cause of her sleeplessness appeared. “No,” she insisted. “I’m fine.”

It took Vik a moment to respond before he finally went, “I see.” He seemed somewhat more reticent than usual, Claire thought. She wasn’t sure what to make of that.

Lydia then asked, “Lady Claire, would you like to ride home in my coach today? It’d be lovely to have a chat together.”

“Oh! Oh, yes,” said Claire.

Judging from the invitation, Lydia must have gathered that something was going on.

The moment the coach door closed behind her, Lydia’s eyes lit up. “So,” she said, “something happened between you and His Highness Prince Vik, I take it?”

Claire understood that her friend’s deeply worried expression from earlier had been sincere, and yet Lydia also could not hide her excitement.

“Something, yes,” she said. “But I’m not sure how to define it.”

Looking back on it, she thought, I’ve never talked with Lydia about the details surrounding my relationship with Vik. In her first life, she had indeed given Lydia the full story after the ball to search for Vik’s future queen, and Lydia, who had already guessed large portions of the tale, had offered Claire her congratulations. Yet this time around, Claire did not know what to say.

“I can tell that much just by looking at the two of you,” Lydia said. She hesitated, her expression growing forlorn, before continuing. “You understand that I cannot marry for love. Would you be so kind as to let me hear about a happy love story for even just a few moments?”

“Well,” Claire began, “yesterday he told me something to the effect of wanting to make arrangements for my dress at the next ball.”

“Wait, who did?”

“His Highness.”

Lydia went silent, and Claire followed suit. Then, normally demure Lydia clapped her hands to her cheeks, turned bright red, and shrieked, “That’s basically a marriage proposal, isn’t it?!”

Claire thanked her lucky stars that they weren’t in the lecture hall right now.

“To be honest,” she said, “I thought the same thing. But His Highness is always so kind to me, so perhaps this is only another act of kindness.”

“But he’s never said anything of the sort before,” Lydia insisted. “And he’s always inviting you to take lunch with him, Lady Claire.”

“That is true. I apologize for how much that must inconvenience—”

“Oh, I don’t care a fig about that. My point is that Prince Vik is always cognizant of his own social status. He never keeps any young ladies around, no matter how noble their houses are.”

Sure enough, Claire realized, she’d seen none of that behavior from Vik in her first life. Yet until he said the words straight out, she could not be sure.

Out of consideration for Claire’s lack of confidence, Lydia smiled. “You might be upset unless he says it outright, but I think at this point in time, His Highness is doing his absolute best to make his intentions known to you. As he lacks a fiancée, I hear he is free to love who he pleases. This means that His Majesty trusts him enough to choose a worthy partner, don’t you see? But in order to marry, he must first present his choice before the king.”

“Present her,” Claire repeated, “before the king.”

“Yes. It doesn’t have to be a formal audience, but even a simple greeting at a ball will do. At any rate, introducing her to the king and earning His Majesty’s permission is crucial.”

Claire remembered Vik’s comment from the night before about introducing her to the king. *So that’s what that was!* she thought. The present of the maple syrup bottle, the hug when he was worried about her, the invitations to lunch—when it all connected, it made far too much sense. What if this truly was more than mere kindness? The very thought made her dizzy.

Lydia's coach brought her to the door of the detached palace, whereupon Claire found that a letter from her aunt had arrived. It was the long-awaited response to her inquiry about Charlotte's adoption. Claire's mind was still a mess from thoughts of Vik, but she somehow managed to set her feelings aside and opened the envelope.

Her aunt's letter confirmed her suspicions. Firstly, Claire's mother had desired to adopt Charlotte as one of her own, as Charlotte's living environment deeply concerned her. She always wished to help somehow. Grandma Florence, the letter went on to say, had been vehemently opposed to the idea, and the chronicle ended with the words, "I'd like to tell you the rest when we next meet, or at least by Charlotte's baptism."

"She'd like to meet with me to talk," Claire mused to herself. "I wonder if perhaps the circumstances are so complicated as to necessitate discussion in person."

Just then, she heard a familiar knock on the door. She did not hesitate before calling back, "Enter!"

It was Dion, armed with his usual beaming grin. "Sorry for being late," he said. "Helping the knights dragged on a bit long."

"Haven't I told you you're free to do whatever you like except for the times when I go into town?" Claire asked.

"Nonsense."

Now that Dion no longer attended school, he spent his days assisting Vik's retainers, which was made possible due to Asbert's signature on Dion's contract with the Martinos. As Dion had quite the good upbringing and fine behavior, he fit in perfectly around not only Claire but also Vik himself.

"Could I talk with you for a moment?" Claire asked. "It's about my younger sister, Charlotte."

"Sure. What's going on?"

"I think I've found a hint on how we can stop Charlotte from running wild. I'm

considering teleporting to Noston before long to look into it myself.” She hesitated before asking, “Would you be willing to come along as my guard?”

“No need to even ask! But why is such a roundabout method even necessary?”

“What do you mean?” Claire asked.

Dion’s expression immediately turned serious. “She will receive white magic, won’t she?” he asked. “I have one color below, blue magic. I know my magic reflected off of you, but since her color is only one above mine, that shouldn’t be a problem this time.”

Claire tensed up as she realized what Dion was insinuating.

He hesitated a moment longer before saying, “You know I’ll do anything for you and His Highness, Claire.”

His smile was as breezy as ever, but it did not reach his eyes.

This meant Dion was offering to curse Charlotte, causing her magic to warp. According to Lui, Collective Magic allowed the caster to fully interfere with the victim’s magic any time they used it. Whenever the victim tried to use magic, they could no longer exchange power with the spirits; whenever the caster used magic, they drained the victim’s magic in the process. This was the situation Claire had inadvertently dragged Dion into.

I never considered it, she thought, but there is that option as well, I suppose.

“Thank you, Dion,” she said. “I’m happy to hear you feel this way, but please don’t speak of it any longer. Please, value yourself mo—”

“I’m not sacrificing myself,” Dion interrupted. “The fact that it reflected off of you was only an exception, and the greatest exception I’ve ever heard of at that.”

He smiled once more, as if the stern gaze from earlier had all just been Claire’s imagination.

I suppose it is natural to consider, as a last resort, she thought. But I’m sure that would cause emotional pain to Charlotte and Dion alike. I can’t have that happen. Claire wanted to save her kingdom while protecting her sister and

friend both. Unable to forsake any of these desires, Claire cast her eyes to the floor.

Three days later, Claire returned home from the Academy and changed into a plain dress. It was almost time.

“Are you excited, Claire?” Dion asked innocently.

“Well, yes,” she admitted. “A bit.” It embarrassed her that he’d correctly guessed her childish feelings.

However, even if it was only for just a few hours, she’d be home again for the first time in a long while. And she would be able to see Anne, no less. In her first life, Claire had not once entertained a desire to go back to Noston, but things were somewhat different now. This time, she had Oscar’s acceptance and Asbert’s support. Even the mere knowledge that she had allies on her side made her feel much more lighthearted.

Once Claire felt Dion place his hand on her shoulder, she cast the spell.

Claire felt as if she were being tightly embraced in a pleasant scent. A slightly shorter woman with a bobbed haircut took Claire into her arms. She was a dainty, delicate woman, but the sunny aura that she radiated from head to toe was decidedly warm and cheery. This was Aunt Anne, whom Claire had not seen for quite some time.

“It has been too long, Aunt Anne,” Claire said. She wanted to make her polite, proper introduction, but Anne hugged Claire tight and still refused to let go.

Anne’s voice echoed in the chapel of the Noston royal palace, empty after she’d bade everyone else to leave. “Oh, Claire, how I’ve missed you,” she said. “I couldn’t believe Benjamin sent you abroad so suddenly! How have you been since your baptism? Well, I hope?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Oh?” Just then, Anne looked up from pressing her cheeks to Claire’s and noticed Dion.

“What a pleasure to meet you,” she said. “I am Claire’s aunt Anne.”

“My name is Dion Mead, and I serve as Miss Claire’s guard. It is a pleasure, my lady,” Dion answered with a genial smile.

Anne turned to Claire in disbelief. “Is he the one who teleported you here?”

For a moment, Claire was at a loss for what to do. Frankly speaking, she wished to hide her true magic power from Noston, but there was no point in hoodwinking her aunt considering what she’d come to talk about.

“No,” Claire admitted. “I did, Aunt Anne.”

“Pardon? But at your baptism...” Anne trailed off. “Claire, just what is going on?”

“I only learned of this accidentally myself,” Claire explained, “but it appears that my mother was born in Old Lindel as opposed to Noston. There was a letter hidden away in the strongbox in the study.”

“Old Lindel?” Anne repeated. Her eyes widened.

“I didn’t think you were aware either,” Claire said. “Everyone believed my mother was descended from a baron.” She hesitated before continuing. “Yet it appears that she was actually the sole survivor of the Lindel royal family after the kingdom was destroyed.”

Then Claire told Anne everything she knew: how her mother had concealed her lineage to protect her family, how the unfortunate accident which caused her death was really an assassination by those who’d orchestrated Lindel’s downfall, how Claire had discovered the letter by chance and then been baptized on Lindel Island partway through her trip to Paffuto, and how she did not know the color of her own magic, apart from the fact that it was even more powerful than silver.

Claire felt guilty telling this whole story around Dion, thinking it would be cruel to him, but Dion only listened quietly with his same pleasant smile.

“I wasn’t aware that all this had happened,” Anne said. “Claire, please forgive me. I can’t believe they had your engagement with Prince Asbert called off and sent you abroad without me being any the wiser.”

“Don’t worry about that, Aunt Anne.” Claire held no attachment to the past. She made an effort to talk brightly, so as not to mislead her poor aunt, whose eyes were filling with tears. “I’ve enjoyed my life in Paffuto ever so much. Truly, I’m thankful I left Noston. I’ve now been blessed with many friends, such as Dion here. As a result, I don’t want to return to Noston. But at any rate, let us leave off on this topic for now.”

Anne appeared shocked to discover that Claire had no desire to come home. “Oh?” she spluttered. “You don’t? Oh my.”

However, once she looked at the expression on Claire’s face, she accepted it immediately. “Indeed,” Anne said, “if the Martinos were to learn of your true magical power under these circumstances, it would cause you quite the bother. It’s best if we not let anyone know. Claire, I am on your side. I’m satisfied so long as you’re happy.”

“Oh, Aunt Anne,” Claire sighed.

“The problem here is Charlotte, correct? If only she would straighten up and fly right.” Anne sighed before continuing. “Charlotte barely attends her lessons. I hear she does whatever she pleases at the Academy, and even His Highness the Prince is at a loss over what to do with her. If her magic doesn’t turn out to be white after all, the Martino family will be placed in quite the pickle.”

White, Claire thought. The word sparked a feeling of unease. Almost every girl born into the Martino family possessed white or silver magic. Yet while indeed so many of them had white magic, it struck Claire as odd that her aunt would limit herself to just that color.

“Aunt Anne, do you know for a fact that Charlotte’s color will be white?” Claire asked.

Anne hesitated before responding. “There has been something rather like a prophecy, you see. This is the very thing you teleported all this way to hear.”

Anne regarded Claire kindly. Claire said nothing and nodded.

“I wonder how I should best go about explaining this. My mother—your grandmother, that is—was the type of person to see visions.”

“Visions?” Claire repeated.

“That’s right. She couldn’t see whatever she wished to see, no, no. She was only able to see fragments of things to come, nothing that could be called a true prophecy. Yet at any rate, she repeatedly warned your family not to adopt a little girl a year younger than you, Claire. My mother didn’t often talk about her visions, so I’m afraid that is all I can remember.”

Once again, Claire felt a vague hazy feeling in her mind. As she tried to fight the haziness, she formed a hypothesis. Were those fragments from her grandmother’s visions scenes that would take place after Claire loaded the save file on the Asbert route from the so-called other world? History showed multiple examples of holy women who received divine revelations from the spirits, but none such oracles existed in this day and age in either Noston or Paffuto, so rare was their occurrence. Considering that, Claire didn’t find it so odd that her grandmother could command a bird’s-eye view of the world in much the same way as she did. However, even if that were the case, Claire realized her grandmother’s visions must have been very fragmentary indeed. As proof of that, Claire had never once heard from her grandmother anything about her mother’s true bloodline or Leo’s attempts to throw away the letter.

“If things proceed according to my mother’s visions,” Anne continued, “then Charlotte will receive white magic at her upcoming baptism.”

“You wished to talk with me in person about how to deal with the baptism, I presume?” Claire asked.

“Indeed. My mother never told me what might happen, but I do know that she was worried about the aftermath of Charlotte’s magic awakening. Charlotte isn’t a fool, but neither has she ever been the type to think things through. She firmly believes she’s the center of the universe, doesn’t she? The number one thing I’m concerned about is that she’ll gain strong magic and not understand how to control or use it.”

Claire thought back to Charlotte’s behavior at the ball that fateful night. She’d spoken to Vik as if she hadn’t even noticed Asbert or Claire in the room. The fact that she so completely disregarded the free will of everyone else around her was also abnormal in and of itself.

Claire was suddenly hit with a burst of vocabulary she didn’t recognize. *It’s*

almost as if Charlotte is a “player character” meeting a “datable boy” for the first time. Yes, that’s right. Charlotte is the player character, the heroine. Of course she would think of herself that way. How could I have forgotten something so important?

However, this moment of clarity lasted only a few moments before the mental fuzziness returned. Things from the other world, she realized, must not have much sticking power in this one.

“Even if Charlotte isn’t the most well behaved, I do hope she won’t use her power to trouble others.” Anne paused before continuing. “As she is now, I fear that may be too difficult for her. I believe your grandmother took action to prevent her visions from coming to pass, but I’m afraid I don’t know the details.”

With Anne at a loss and Charlotte’s education going so poorly, Claire knew then that she couldn’t hope for a better outcome this time around.

“But Claire,” Anne continued. “I must say, you seem quite different. You’ve always been sharp, but now I sense a power in your eyes as well.”

“Thank you very much, Aunt Anne. It may take me a little time, but I have a plan to deal with Charlotte. If anything seems amiss here, please let me know.”

Of course, Claire didn’t have a plan at this very moment. However, she’d intended that statement as a means to keep Dion in line, as he was already sending her a cheerful grin reminding her she could use his curse.

“But of course, Claire,” Anne promised. She hugged her niece once more.

When Claire looked up, she realized that the sky through the chapel ceiling was already quite dark. It was time to end this briefest of reunions.

“Oh, but I was hoping,” Dion admitted, “to see a bit of Noston’s scenery.”

“Why, what a fine idea,” said Anne. “No one comes near the chapel at this time of evening. Why don’t you pop outside and take a little walk?”

Anne, Claire could tell, was already quite taken with Dion as well. As the two of them smiled gently, Claire said, “Yes, that does sound nice, if only for just a few minutes.”

The chapel stood on one end of the palace, and while an inner corridor connected it to the palace proper, the chapel itself was ringed with silent gardens and springs. It was almost like another world. Claire had fond memories of playing near here when she was just a little girl.

How this brings me back, she thought as she stood in the corridor and looked out over the garden.

But just then, she saw a black silhouette of a person on the edge of her vision. Claire jolted, recognizing her mistake, but it was too late to hide.

Dubiously, the figure asked, "What...are you doing here?"

A few meters away, frozen in place, stood Claire and Dion's benefactor.

Claire hesitated before saying, "It is an honor to make your acquaintance once more, Your Highness."

"And yours," Asbert answered, "but what is this? Am I dreaming?"

Claire smoothly rattled off the excuse she'd prepared in case of the worst. "You are not, Your Highness. I came here in disguise to visit my aunt and ask her about Charlotte. I only arrived today, but now as my business is finished, it is time for me to leave again. Please do keep it a secret from my father."

"That's certainly a very cramped schedule," Asbert remarked. "I'd better see to having a room made up for you at once."

His composure returning to him, Asbert made to turn on his heel, but Claire frantically stopped him. "Wait, please!" she said. "I would like to introduce you to my guard, Dion. Thank you for assisting him a short while ago."

"Your Highness," Dion said, "it is an honor to make your acquaintance. I am Dion Minogue of Paffuto." He performed a low, sweeping bow.

"Oh, so you're this Dion fellow?" Asbert asked. "I've heard that you're quite an excellent person, for all your complex background."

Claire felt the slightest bit of surprise. Of course, she was immensely grateful to Asbert for writing Dion's letter of recommendation. However, considering how difficult Asbert found it to hold interest in anyone but himself, she had

never expected him to remember any of the contents of said letter.

Claire turned a beaming smile on Asbert. “He is the heir to a once-great house in Paffuto. We didn’t arrive here by horse, you see.”

Dion, catching her insinuation, followed suit with, “I’m very grateful to you for granting me a position which makes such good use of my talents, Miss Claire.”

“Oh, does it now? My, Paffuto truly has a wealth of talented individuals, now doesn’t it?”

Asbert readily accepted it without a hint of suspicion. Claire couldn’t possibly wrap her head around the fact that this benevolent, purely complimentary man was the same one whom Charlotte would use and discard in a few months’ time.

“In that case,” Asbert went on, “I suppose we have a bit more time, don’t we? Why don’t the three of us have a little chat?”

At this suggestion, coming out of left field from a pleasantly smiling Asbert, Claire and Dion exchanged glances.

Asbert led them to the closest parlor. It was a room off of the corridor connecting the palace and chapel. One wall was lined with windows which offered views of the garden. *I had no idea such a lovely room existed*, Claire thought. In addition to two long couches and a table, the room’s corners were decorated with the same sweet-smelling flowers as bloomed in the gardens. While it was not especially large, the place could comfortably seat several people for a conversation.

“Your Highness,” Claire began, “whatever is going on with my sister? She hasn’t replied to any of my letters recently. I also heard from my aunt that she is not attending her lessons to learn to be the queen consort.”

“Lately, Charlotte has been entirely caught up in her upcoming baptism. The palace is footing so many bills for dresses and jewelry that I can hardly think a single person could wear so many garments.”

“Oh my goodness!” Claire rushed to bow. “I am so sorry.”

She knew that Oscar had grown stricter with Charlotte, so he would never have allowed her to shirk her lessons and devote her days to nothing but shopping. Hence, Charlotte sent all her bills to Asbert.

“No, there’s no need for that,” said Asbert. “She is my fiancée, after all. However, I do feel there is one thing which is slightly curious. If you were coming here, I wonder why you didn’t go to see her yourself. Well, but that is none of my concern. More importantly, how is life in Paffuto treating you?”

“Thanks to you, I couldn’t ask for more.”

Claire’s impression of Asbert was that of someone lacking in kindness or, perhaps, someone who was a stranger to the niceties of human feelings. Naturally, this impression had largely been fostered in her first life. On the other hand, meeting his former fiancée and inviting her to take tea with him in a room with such a lovely view defied her expectations of him.

Noticing Claire’s baffled look, Asbert said, “I do apologize for detaining you. However, I was hoping I might hear what sort of people the Paffish royal family and nobility are. I know you live in the palace, Claire, and so I thought I might take the chance to invite you to tea.”

“I suppose this is related to...” Claire hesitated. “The portal?”

“So you are aware of it?” Asbert looked surprised but continued all the same. “That is correct. Opinions within the kingdom are divided. We hear that this directive is being spearheaded by the Crown Prince of Paffuto, not the king. I must wonder, is this Prince Vik really someone we can trust?”

This question struck Claire as odd. From her understanding, the decision was already set in stone with no means to overturn it. What Asbert truly wanted to know, Claire felt, wasn’t whether or not the portal was safe for Noston, but simply who Vik was as a person.

“He is—His Highness is, excuse me, a great man. Not only is he quick thinking and wise, but he is blessed with an excellent heart. Above all else, he is a superbly well-rounded individual. I speak not only as his friend but as a citizen of my homeland when I say that he is a man worthy of your trust.”

“I see,” Asbert said. He seemed to agree with Claire’s assessment of Vik’s

character. After his slight response, he fell silent.

A good part of a minute passed before Dion, seated next to Claire, packed away his sunny smile and stretched. "Well," he said, "once this portal is complete, you'll be able to make frequent visits here, now won't you, Claire?"

Claire blinked. "I will?" she asked. *That has to do with why we are constructing the portal, she thought. Once the magical tornado forms and my magic color becomes known, I'll need to reassure them so as not to cause any trouble.*

"Yes, but of course you will," Dion said, responding with a strong smile and a frantic stomp on Claire's boot. Had she said the wrong thing? She took a glance at Asbert, only to see his cheeks reddening.

"As your former fiancé," Asbert said, "I know you must think this an odd thing for me to say. However, while I am on one hand quite happy to hear that you are having an excellent time in Paffuto, there is another part of me that wishes quite strongly that you would stay here."

Claire finally understood what all this meant: the honored guest treatment he'd requested for her, his handling of Charlotte, the overly long personal letter, the letter of recommendation for Dion. Perhaps that was even why he'd asked about Vik. Claire felt as if this was happening to someone else, not her. If only this could have happened during her first life, back when she'd had to endure such isolation in the Royal Aristocratic Academy.

At the very least, Asbert deserved a thank you. She hesitated before saying, "I'm afraid I already have an admirer."

That wasn't gratitude, Claire realized too late. The words that had slipped out of her mouth surprised even herself.

"Yes," said Asbert. "I'd assumed as much from the way you spoke of him earlier." He paused before continuing. "Still, I only wished to tell you."

Then, completely defying her expectations, he smiled at her.

Claire considered amending her harsh words, but his unexpected smile made her relax into one of her own. It was the first time she'd ever seen Asbert make such a gentle expression.

“I believe you may know a young lady,” Claire finally said, “the prince’s cousin, who will be coming to study at the Royal Aristocratic Academy. Lady Nicola is her name. When I first met her, she reminded me a bit of Charlotte.”

“She’s like Charlotte?” Asbert mused. “I see.”

Claire sensed the inner turmoil in his dazed expression. “However,” she added, “Lady Nicola is a wonderful young lady. I meant that perhaps she can be a good role model for Charlotte.”

“If only Charlotte were inclined to learn from her.”

“I hope she will be. However, even if she rarely shows it, I believe Lady Nicola is rather afraid of being alone. Could I trouble you to keep an eye on her?”

“Of course,” said Asbert. “I will see to it.”

Asbert spoke up again when the conversation wound down and Dion and Claire made to leave. “I truly am very glad to know that Prince Vik is someone I can trust. Someone you can trust too, Claire. If, perhaps...” He paused before continuing. “If there is something you want him to know, I recommend you tell him sooner rather than later. As you are certainly aware, the likes of he and I need to make these things formal. And it is too late for you to regret it once the opportunity has passed.”

Claire could say nothing in response to that. The advice of her old friend had struck more of a nerve than she’d anticipated. His unexpectedly perceptive counsel served as words of encouragement for her to act.

A slight exhaustion kicked in upon her return to Paffuto. She opened the window before sinking deep into the couch cushions. *Goodness, I’m rather tired*, she thought.

“Would you like me to go report to His Highness in your stead?” Dion offered.

“I’m sorry to ask,” said Claire. “But would you?”

“Sure thing. You take your time and rest.”

Dion set off with a spring in his step. Claire watched him leave and then closed her eyes. In truth, while she felt slightly sluggish, nothing physically

prevented her from getting up and reporting to Vik. But Asbert's words ate at her—naturally, not his profession of feelings for her, but his advice to act before it was too late. That resonated with her more than she had expected.

In my first life, she thought, all I did was accept Vik's feelings once he made them plain to me. Here in my second life, I wanted for us to at least be close friends. Then, I started wanting to be around him more, and the rest has all just been an indulgent luxury. But in the end, I've never voiced any of these feelings to him.

Aggravated by her own cowardice, Claire grabbed a cushion and buried her face in it.

Vik sat in his office chair, resting his face in his hands, until Dion's voice made him quickly look up.

"Excuse me, Your Highness," Dion announced. "We've returned from Noston."

It was still not quite dinnertime, but the sun had already begun to set. Vik remained in his office at this hour purely to wait for this report.

"Fine work," Vik complimented him. "How is Claire?"

"She seems a bit tired from the teleportation, so she is resting now."

Lui signaled Vik with her eyes and stood up. "Should I go check on her?" she asked.

Dion grinned but shook his head. "No, she's all right. Beyond that, I believe she's distressed about something else altogether."

Vik's expression changed. "Was the news from Lady Anne that dire?"

Dion explained the situation: how Claire's grandmother had been blessed with visions, and how she'd predicted the likely possibility of Charlotte running wild. Indeed, Charlotte's reeducation was going poorly, and she continued to do whatever she pleased.

Once he'd listened to Dion's recount of affairs, Vik nodded in understanding. "Well, we did expect that if there was anything to be done about Miss

Charlotte, it would have to wait until after she receives her magic.”

Lui, listening quietly up until now with an expression of slight surprise, asked, “Did you say that Claire’s grandmother received divine revelations from the spirits? Considering how magically powerful the Martino family is, that does fit the facts.”

“Also,” Dion added, “we accidentally ran into the crown prince of Noston.”

“Wait, to Prince Asbert?” Vik asked, alarmed.

“Yes, but don’t worry,” Dion continued breezily. “We fooled him into thinking I had teleported the both of us there. At any rate, the prince then informed Claire he still has lingering feelings for her.”

An awkward silence filled the room. Finally, Vik said, “I see.” He flipped a pen across the table with a clatter.

Lui began polishing her sword and, with an air that none of this pertained to her in any way, remarked, “From what I’ve heard, Claire doesn’t think much of Prince Asbert, but I’m sure you’d be much better off asking her directly rather than trusting my account.”

Vik glanced at her and then shot out of his seat.

“Oh?” Denis asked. “Where’re you off to, Vik?”

Vik didn’t turn around as he answered, “Just out for a moment.”

The retainers watched him go before turning to each other and sharing exasperated grins.

Vik initially planned to call on Claire via her front door, as was only common sense, yet he remembered her whispering about good memories back when he’d come through her window. *I suppose the me in her first life must have visited her through her window*, he reasoned. Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. If Claire had rented a room in a baron’s house in her first life, was it his rank that had prevented him from visiting her the normal way?

With that answer in mind, Vik set off for the back garden. As he approached Claire’s suite, he saw a lamp lit in her main rooms, but her bedchambers were

dark. He wondered if she was still awake and drew up to the open window to check.

He saw a pair of feet on the couch. "Claire?" he called, but she did not respond.

He lifted himself into the room to see and found her fast asleep on the sofa. *What with the trip to and from Noston and her aunt's story, she must have been exhausted*, he thought. He gently tugged the cushion out of her hands and carefully, so as not to wake her, carried Claire into her bedroom.

After laying her in bed and covering her with the blanket, Vik sat down on a bench facing her side of the bed. He knew propriety demanded he leave now and let her maid handle the rest, yet he could not bring himself to go. *I came in a fit of jealousy*, he thought. *But I wonder, if I were to tell her my current feelings, how she would take it.*

As drowsiness descended over him too, Vik closed his eyes there on the bench.

The next morning, Claire woke to Sophie's panicked scream. "Your Highness! Your Highness, whatever are you doing here?"

"Oh," came Vik's sleepy voice. "You're right, so I am here. I came here...just a minute ago. Yes. Could I trouble you for some tea this morning?"

Sophie stumbled over her words before answering, "Yes, as you command, Your Highness."

Still befuddled by sleep and unable to make out anything clearly, Claire lay curled up in the covers and blankly watched Sophie and Vik's conversation. *What is he doing here?* she wondered. Her thoughts gradually became more cohesive, but she simply couldn't come up with a good reason to explain Vik's presence in her bedchambers this morning. Then she noticed that she was wearing the same dress as yesterday. She must have fallen asleep somewhere. Had he carried her to bed?

"Good morning," Vik said. "Did you sleep well?"

Claire blinked her eyes a few times. "Yes," she said.

“I’ll be going into town later today. Would you like to come with me?” he offered. “We don’t have school today, after all.”

After sharing each other’s company over their morning cups of tea, the two retired to their own rooms to finish their toilette before leaving the palace and heading into Wurtz. Vik, returning again to pick Claire up, wore a complete set of street clothes and a dagger at his waist. His hood covered his distinctive emerald green eyes and blond hair.

“Are you positive it’s all right to go out with only the two of us?” Claire asked.

“The others all say I’m fine so long as I’m with you,” Vik admitted bashfully, “and I think they’re all still asleep.”

Claire took his hand and let him help her onto a horse. It was a chilly late autumn morning, yet oddly enough, Claire did not feel the cold. Her heartbeat climbed as Vik joined her on the horse, his chest warm against her back.

The horse trotted through the streets of the city and down a side road that wound its way up a gentle slope. Vik stopped the horse at the summit.

“I’ve been here before,” Claire remarked. “Well, I will, I suppose. Next summer.”

“This is awfully complicated,” Vik teased with a chuckle as he shyly helped her down from the horse.

His clear eyes matched the color of his earrings and sparkled in the morning sun. Claire could not take her eyes away from them.

Below her wound the gentle cobblestone street she and Vik had just climbed. The homes and shops lining the flagstone-covered street still showed no signs of life at this hour. In the distinct early morning quietude, the view provided a pleasant sense of anticipation for the coming day.

Vik braced his head on his hands against a stone wall and looked out over the town. “Not bad, huh?” he said. “I’ve always been pretty exceptional, ever since I was a little boy.”

Claire giggled. She gathered from the tone of his voice that he meant this as a

joke, but it was true, even without her personal bias. “Maybe so,” she said.

“Keith and I used to come here.”

“Did you, now?” This was her first time hearing such a thing.

“I think I must have been somewhat of an odd child. Keith was always telling me that there’s more to life than just studying and practicing swordplay. Considering how serious he is now, it’s hard to imagine that he was the one who used to encourage me to leave the palace, right?”

“Hmm,” Claire mused. “You’re right. I can’t imagine it. But I think that’s because you’ve ended up exactly where Keith wanted you to be.”

Vik gave her a gentle glance before continuing his story. “You once said that this place was like all your happiness in Paffuto condensed down into one view, didn’t you? You know, I think the same way. I always feel better every time I come here.”

Lately, every time Claire and Vik had been alone together, she’d seen much of this relaxed, tension-free side of him. However, as he stood there now, he appeared intensely serious. She could sense that the view from this place was very special to him.

“That makes sense,” she said. “But you know, I said that about the evening. Right now, it’s more like I feel hopeful. It’s as if I can go out and seize the day, as cliché as that may be. When I stand here, I feel oddly invigorated.”

Vik’s eyes opened wide momentarily before he smiled at her gently once more. “I suppose you’re right.”

In the fragrance of the fresh early morning air, Claire heard the rattle of cart wheels turning far off in the distance.

“Lui mentioned this to me,” Vik said. “Is it true you’d really like to become a lady-in-waiting at court?”

“Yes,” Claire said, “however...” She trailed off, slightly unsure of how to respond. Granted, she did see the appeal of working at court. Yet her mind kept returning to Asbert’s words. *“The likes of he and I need to make these things formal. And it is too late for you to regret it once the opportunity has passed.”*

What should I say? she wondered. *If he believes my dream really is to work at court, then perhaps he will move on.*

“I have another position,” Vik said, “that would make better use of your talents.”

“And what might that be?” Claire’s heart sank as she realized she might have already missed the window of opportunity to tell him her feelings.

Vik continued, “It’s something that’s been on my mind a bit. Namely, I’ve been wondering about the things you see and the people you have feelings for.”

Claire did not know how to interpret this. She raised her head and looked at Vik. His earlier gentle expression was now gone, and in his eyes, she could see her own startled reflection. She felt like she had seen Vik make this face once before, and as she remembered when, her heart rate skyrocketed in wild anticipation.

He still hadn’t finished answering her question, but she spoke up anyway and declared in a whisper, “There is something I would like.”

“And what is it?” Vik asked. He delivered his slow, measured response in an incredibly gentle and kind tone of voice. It had the same warmth Claire remembered so well from the many times she’d heard it in her first life.

“Vik, do you carry a pocket watch?” she asked.

“That I do. You mean this one? You’re well familiar with it, I take it.”

Claire felt butterflies in her stomach as Vik removed the watch from his breast pocket and presented it to her for her inspection. Vik’s coat of arms was engraved on the back next to the simple dial.

Vik made a connection from the expression on Claire’s face as she received it. “This was important to you, wasn’t it?” he asked.

Unsure of how to answer, Claire silently nodded.

“In that case, I’ll gladly give it to you.”

No, she thought immediately. It wasn’t the pocket watch she wanted.

Her thoughts were all in a muddle, but she wanted to clear up his misunderstanding. “You spoke highly of my talents just a moment ago,” Claire said. “But didn’t I also once tell you that I’m really not all that special?”

“You did,” said Vik. “But I’m afraid I can’t agree with you there. You never hated your family or sister after everything they did to you in your first life, and you worked as hard as you could in this unfamiliar new life without ever losing heart. I don’t think there are many people who could have done such a thing.”

“Oh, no,” Claire said. “That’s not who I really am at all.”

Her voice trembled in fear of revealing her true self. However, Claire managed to rally herself and insisted, “I’m afraid you’ll be disillusioned once you learn that everything I’ve done has been for the sake of my own personal feelings.”

“What personal feelings are these?”

“In my first life, you gave me this pocket watch along with a promise. Those two things were both very important to me.”

Vik gasped. After a moment, he asked, “Should I make that same promise now? Will it give you just as much happiness as it did before?”

“I didn’t know you well in my first life,” Claire said. “Well, no, I did know you, but I only followed your lead and let you protect me. That’s why, right now, I’m positive that I’m much happier than I ever was before.”

“Claire,” Vik breathed.

All the bewilderment drained from his face, but she pressed on in spite of her nerves. “I think that if you’re already making plans to present me to the king, the least you could do is tell me you love me. Because, Vik, I’ve been waiting for this day to come the entire time—”

Before she could continue further, Vik closed his mouth for her with a kiss. It only lasted a moment, too short for Claire to even shut her eyes. After they parted, she took a step back in shock before Vik’s eyes pulled her in once more. She realized only now that he was holding her, one hand on her arm and another on her cheek, preventing her from drawing away. She was struck by an indescribable mixture of bashfulness, delight, and restlessness to be in his arms.

“I’m sorry I made you wait,” he said. “I love you.”

Vik’s hold on her slackened slightly as he wiped away a tear from Claire’s cheek. In contrast to the strength with which he had held her just now, his touch was reserved and gentle. Then, once more, he enfolded her in a slow, deep kiss.

The night she had met Vik in Ilias in her first life, the day she had chosen to leave it all behind and start again, and the anguish she had felt at knowing they could not have the same relationship again all ran through her head. Claire wanted to respond to him, but her head brimmed with so many thoughts she could not voice a single one of them.

“I know,” he told her. “It’s all right.”

Another tear spilled down her cheek. *I never want to leave him again*, she vowed to herself with an incredible sense of euphoria.

Claire did not know how much time had passed, but she now began to smell the scents of people preparing breakfast wafting to her on the wind. Beneath her and Vik’s eyes, the city began to come to life.

“Since we’re already here, why not stop for breakfast somewhere and see the town before heading back?” Vik suggested.

“No,” Claire said. “We must go back at once. Don’t you have so much work to do, Vik?”

Vik looked at her with something halfway between a smile and a frown. “Claire, you really are something else,” he said. “My retainers will be overjoyed when we formalize our engagement.”

That, Claire realized, was the final promise he could bear to make in this sweet time together.



The moment Vik and Claire entered his office, Lui and Denis respectively chorused, “Welcome back,” and, “Wow, that was fast.”

Denis looked oddly disappointed. “We were betting on what time you’d return home,” he explained.

“Denis was, rather,” Lui clarified smoothly as a red-cheeked Vik glared at them both.

Claire giggled at their usual antics when, suddenly, Keith went down on one knee before her with no warning. She gasped internally.

“Claire,” he began, “I am truly grateful that you chose to be with Vik. I pledge my fealty to you alongside my master.”

Behind her, Vik managed to remain calm, but a small hint of a frown crept into his expression. “Keith,” he said. “I haven’t even gotten to that either.”

Keith immediately blanched. “Pardon?”

Lui stepped around Keith and gave Claire a hug. “Welcome back, Claire. From now on, we will offer you our protection. More than we have before, that is. So please take care of Vik for us.”

Oh, Lui, Claire thought. Once again on the verge of tears, she could not speak and merely nodded.

Vik looked on, pleased, and said, “I’d best be off to tell the king the news at once.”

“Is it possible to give me just a little more time before that?” Claire asked. “Considering my social standing, it would not be proper for the king to grant me an audience when he is already so occupied with other matters.”

“You raise a good point,” Vik said. “But still, I—”

“I want to be with you too,” she insisted. “But what people think of me will reflect on you, won’t it? So please, let me do what I can until the time comes when we can call on him together. For now, you should focus on your own work.”

“I-If you insist.”

Vik looked disappointed as his mounting excitement over their impending engagement was dampened by the strength of Claire's determined assertion.

After he saw her and Dion off back to the royal palace, Keith, now returned to his usual good cheer, smiled at Vik. "Should I report this matter to the king?" he asked.

Vik's expression showed clear displeasure with the idea but, after a few moments, he muttered, "If you would."

Epilogue

Charlotte gaped in dismay as her father pulled her over into the corner of the ballroom. "From abroad, you said?" she repeated. "I had no idea."

"Yes," Benjamin said. "I spoke to the king about it just now. I've been informed that the King of Paffuto's niece will be coming to start school in Noston in the spring. She appears to be quite the brilliant young lady. Take care to not let her outperform you, Charlotte."

"Yes, father." She squeezed the fabric of her dress tightly, unable to stomach this newest development. *What in the world?* she thought. *I wasn't supposed to have some young duchess from another kingdom come barging in on me while I attend the Academy!*

Just a few days prior, Charlotte had been baptized at the village on the border of Paffuto and successfully received her white magic. Today's ball was designed to celebrate that happy fact. Of course, her father and the King of Noston were both overjoyed, and yet her fiancé, Prince Asbert, looked distressed for some reason Charlotte couldn't fathom. Although Asbert had escorted her to the party, he had more or less left her to her own devices, so Charlotte had been let to wander the sea of unfamiliar faces before Benjamin approached her and delivered the news.

To begin with, Charlotte continued, it's odd enough that Claire isn't here. I suppose that there's nothing to be done about those infuriating lessons, but still. I'm the heroine! The main character! Is this really how it's supposed to go?

She pouted, puffing out her cheeks, and glared around the room. *Oh!* Charlotte thought, for she'd finally spotted Asbert after he'd vanished on her without her noticing.

"Prince Asbert!" she cried, twining her arm with his. "There you are. You should introduce me to everyone!"

"I apologize," he said. "But I'm afraid I simply must greet all the nobles here in

terms of rank. I haven't the time to speak to my friends at such functions, at least not until the very end of the party. Haven't you learned this?"

"I'm sorry. I only asked because I saw Lady Caroline, and I just forgot myself." *And I wanted to show off the dress I had made just for this occasion!* she thought. *I look like a princess with everything from my boots to my jewelry! And my escort is none other than the prince. Well, he should have been. He ran off before I could show him to Lady Caroline!* Charlotte's mental list of complaints grew longer and longer.

Granted, she'd lost sight of Asbert in her rush to say hello to her friends in the first place. Although she had apologized, she didn't mean a bit of it.

Now that I've been baptized, I can use white magic, she added to herself. What Charlotte wanted more than anything else was to make those awful lessons with Lady Anne stop. She summoned her magic and tried appealing to Asbert in mock dejection. "Your Highness," she said, "could I have a word with you about my lessons? Don't you think I've done well enough to stop already?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "That doesn't strike me as a good idea at all. What would Claire think?"

Charlotte clicked her tongue in anger the moment he said her sister's name. *Claire!* she thought. *It's always Claire!*

She gave herself over to her anger and continued with a much greater quantity of magic.

"To tell you the truth," she said, "Claire and I never had so good of a relationship. I can't help but think she asked Lady Anne to teach me just to torment me."

Just as she thought she'd launched a full-scale magical attack, a loud voice behind her boomed, "Charlotte! Congratulations."

That voice belonged to none other than Anne, aunt of all the Martino children. "Thank you very much, Aunt Anne," Charlotte said.

"Now, I hope that this inspires you to come to the chapel more often," Anne reprimanded her.

“I apologize that my fiancée causes you such trouble, Lady Anne,” Asbert said with a slight bow.

“Oh, heavens, Your Highness, no such thing! I didn’t expect teaching her to be an easy task to begin with. Which brings me to you, Charlotte,” she added, turning to her niece. “I must say, it was fast of you to give up this early. I knew you didn’t like studying, but it still surprised me.”

Charlotte sulked and looked away.

“Here, Your Highness, do try this.” Anne handed Asbert a glass of sparkling water foaming with tiny bubbles. “It’s hard to keep a clear head if you drink nothing but alcohol.”

Anne smiled innocently, but Charlotte bit her lip at the double meaning in her words.

This was Charlotte—not someone like Claire who knew of the other world, merely an ordinary nasty, inconsiderate dating sim protagonist. She believed that the whole world existed solely for her, but the unexpected developments in her life had only just begun.

The End

Extra Story

The following is a tale that occurs several days after Vik and Claire shared their feelings with one another.

The most bustling restaurant in the whole town was packed to the gills at dinnertime, but the six friends had the inner room, furthest from the hubbub, all to themselves.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Vik asked.

Claire couldn’t help but chuckle to see him so concerned. “Of course,” she said. “This is fine.”

“Sorry, Claire. We chose a private room for security purposes,” Keith explained. “I know you might have preferred the main dining room.”

“You’re always so slow on the uptake, Keith. They must have used a private room in her first life too. Duh,” Denis groaned.

Claire giggled. “You’re correct,” she said. “We usually took private rooms when we came to restaurants.”

Today, Claire, Vik, and all the rest had gone out to dine together. Lui and Denis always took their meals in town on their days off, but Vik and Claire rarely joined them. However, today was a special occasion.

“I’m surprised Vik extended the invitation to us,” Lui remarked. “After he proposed for this to be a gathering to share memories of Claire’s first life. Well, but I suppose it must have been Claire’s idea, no?”

“Shut it, Lui,” Vik grumbled.

Claire felt slightly guilty. *He must really have wanted time for us to be alone together*, she thought. *That makes me happy, but all the same...* Vik seemed to be worried about all the loneliness she’d felt in the wake of parting from her beloved in her first life. However, Claire wanted to create new memories with

Vik much, much more than dwell in the past. To her, it was only natural that she should love the man in front of her the most, he whose every strength and weakness she knew alike. Thus, when Vik proposed the party idea to her, she had responded by inviting everyone out to share a meal as they had done in her first life.

“Still, I can’t believe I brought you to a place like this,” Vik complained. “Sure, it’s popular and all, but this is no place to take a lady.”

“I keep telling you, Vik,” Claire explained again, “but I was hiding my social standing from you when we first met. And besides, we’d already been friends for a long time.”

“Okay,” said Vik. “And how about now?”

His casual comments made Claire blink in shock and blush.

For some reason, seeing her that way made him turn red as well. “Oh, no.” Vik amended his words. “I didn’t mean it like that.” The relaxed nature of the restaurant had made him forget that others were watching.

“No, it’s all right,” Claire said. She looked away from Vik as an awkward silence filled the room. Keith looked uncomfortable, Denis smirked, Lui smiled coolly, and Dion opened the menu with a grin.

“Wow, what a feast!” Denis remarked. “Anyone want to go for a toast?”

The friends grabbed their glasses.

In addition to the reenactment of the dinner in Claire’s past, today was a celebration for Claire and Vik. Today marked the long-awaited day in which their feelings finally converged on the same page.

“I pledge my fealty to Claire alongside my lord,” Keith swore.

“Forget Vik,” Denis joked. “I’d rather pledge my fealty to Claire only.”

“Congratulations, Vik and Claire,” Lui said.

“Congrats!” Dion cheered. “I’ll happily give you some space whenever you two want to have another long talk together!”

Vik and Claire exchanged glances and grinned as their friends congratulated

them each in turn.

“You guys all know nothing’s going to change, right?” Vik asked.

“He’s right,” said Claire. “But thank you all anyway.”

For some reason, Claire suddenly remembered the tea party she’d held with just her, Vik, and Denis shortly before casting her final purification spell. *Back then, she thought, I felt truly sorrowful to part from them. I couldn’t even watch them go for fear that it’d ruin my resolve. But now is different. I’m glad I’ve been able to come back to this again.*

Denis cheerfully lifted his glass, a now-familiar sight for her. The sounds of the loud dining room outside, the delicious, fragrant food, and her friends’ smiling faces surrounded her.

“And with no further ado,” Denis announced, “cheers!”

Claire had finally made it. And this wonderful evening had only just begun.

Afterword

Thank you very much to everyone who has picked up my humble book. The first volume is complete, and in a surprising turn of events, here is volume two. Sorry about everything! I hope you enjoyed it!

This volume begins when Claire reloads her save data and encounters an unfamiliar past. To tell you the truth, this was received with mixed reactions in the web version. I was still a rookie author at the time, and my initial panicked reaction was to go, “Oh no! I’m sorry!” There, now I’ve zipped through the summary of the first half of this book.

With that being said, I wrote this volume thinking about how I really would have liked to write Vik and Claire getting together. To be honest, I am very nervous about what the reception of this revised edition will be because many people told me they enjoyed the online version of this story. Please send me your thoughts. I would love to hear them!

Once again, I had Nemusuke’s beautiful illustrations for this book! In particular, I love the front cover. Ever since I received the rough draft, I’d go back and stare at it every day for months. I hope you’ll also flip back to look at those two beautiful people from time to time as you enjoy this story.

Also, a third volume of this book is on its way. This is only possible through all of your support, so I am nothing but grateful. I hope you’ll look forward to this third volume taking a different direction from the web series too.

Lastly, a big thank you to everyone involved in publishing this book. I am so very grateful to the readers, Nemusuke for their beautiful illustrations, Ushio Shirotori for their work on the manga adaptation, the editorial staff at Mag Garden and Kadokawa for publishing advertisements in their monthly magazines, and the many other people who have supported me. Thank you very much.

I hope to see you again in volume three.



Formerly, *the* Fallen Daughter *of the* Duke

"Thank you," she said, gripping the bag tightly.

Vik smiled back bashfully. Afterwards, he continued to tell her about his trip, with the majority of his stories focusing less on the details of the official duties of his tour and more on the fun downtime shared with his retainers. He described every scene so vividly Claire felt as if she could reach out and touch them. It was a miraculous evening, retrieving and enjoying the times she had lost.



Claire Martino

Daughter of Duke Martino of Noston. In order to change an undesirable future, Claire decided to embark on a second life. Her magical powers, while impressive, are kept a secret from her homeland.

Dion Mead

The eldest son of the treacherous House Mead. He wields a unique magical curse that allows him to block other people's magic, but using it does not quite go as planned...

Bonus Short Story

Dion and Dessert

It'd been a couple of weeks since I'd taken on my new name of Dion Minogue and begun working for Claire with her family's support. One night after dinner, I noticed that, although we'd finished our daily briefing meeting and it had now grown quite late, Claire still hadn't extinguished the lamp in her parlor. I wondered if she was all right, so I peeped in to check.

She greeted me with one of her usual lovely smiles. "Are you still studying, Claire?" I asked.

"Yes. I'll go for just a little longer," she said. "You can retire to your own rooms if you'd like. Won't you be helping Keith and the others tomorrow?"

"I'll bring you some herbal tea before I tuck in, then."

"I appreciate the thought, but you needn't go to such lengths for my sake. I'm fine, really."

Ignoring her apologetic look, I set off with a grin to the small kitchen outside her room. When Claire's maid, Sophie, brought her tea at night, she always chose chamomile for its relaxing properties. Sophie had already gone to her room for the evening, so I made the tea like she'd taught me before. Figuring that Claire might like a snack to go with it, I opened the pantry and found a plate of pastries right there on the shelf in front of me. With both pastries and tea in tow, I carried a tray back to Claire's room.

Naturally, I'd never waited on anyone like this when I was a Mead. It would not have been proper for the heir of the family to do so, and I always quailed before my lord grandfather's wishes, as timid as a baby bunny.

As the heir to a household about which many dark rumors were whispered, I grew up thinking there were three things of no use to me: my own sense of identity, self-pride, and dessert. I existed solely to do my grandfather's bidding.

No matter what he ordered me to do, I was expected to be ready with immediate agreement, and I was forbidden from thinking deeply about any of the missions he tasked me with. That left me with no opinions. Self-pride? What was that?

Well, I call them “missions,” but Diana and I were only given the most childish tasks once we were old enough to attend the Royal Academy near our family’s lands. Therefore, neither she nor I ever came into contact with the ne’er-do-wells who visited our home.

But as for desserts... I must have loved them as a child, but at some point along the way, I lost my ability to enjoy them. Yet when Claire Mesmerized me, I suddenly found myself with the odd desire to consume sweet treats in great quantities. It was as if all these suppressed desires had now been set free.

“I’ve brought your tea,” I said.

When I placed the teacup and plate of pastries on her desk, Claire’s eyes gleamed as if she’d just remembered something.

“Thank you,” she said. “Oh! Dion, you didn’t eat the pastries yet?”

“No. But they do look incredible. Do you mind if I have one the next time you have some?”

Since the pastries had been in the kitchenette, I’d thought they would be fine for her to take with her tea. But maybe I’d made a mistake somehow.

“Of course not,” Claire said. “These are yours, after all. The kitchen staff brought them here today and said they were for you.”

“For me?” I repeated. I was startled, as I’d never expected this response.

Claire smiled back at me, as happy as if the treats were for her. “Yes. They mentioned you’ve been helping them with chores and such while I’m at school. I think they’ve all taken a great liking to you.”

“Now that you mention it,” I mused, “I think I did help them organize the palace pantries. I had nothing else to do, after all.”

She giggled. “You’re an amazing person, Dion. People love you wherever you go.”

“That’s not true,” I protested.

The only reason I’d even had the opportunity to get to know so many people in the palace was because Claire had Mesmerized me. As I’d betrayed the Meads, my father and grandfather were now dead, whereas my mother and sister lived on in exile. I was the only one who remained here in Paffuto, according to Claire’s reckoning. She seemed to feel responsible for it all. But judging by what I knew from my first life, I figured we’d have headed for ruin sooner or later anyway. That’s why the feeling of freedom in my new life was so much greater than anything I’d had before.

Prince Vik’s retainer Lui had told me the spell on me could never be lifted, but I rather felt like I was returning to the same person I’d been as a little boy. I hated plotting other people’s downfalls. I wanted to help people. And—more than anything else in the world—I loved dessert.

“These are yours,” Claire insisted. “You should eat them, Dion.”

A sweet, heavenly scent wafted up from the plate she offered me. I put one of the golden-brown treats in my mouth, which subsequently flooded with an indulgently scrumptious taste.

“This is amazing!” I cried.

Claire giggled. “I’m sure the kitchen staff will be pleased to hear you like it so much.”

“I’ll go tell them thank you tomorrow. Do you think they’ll need any more help? Maybe they’ll give me desserts again!”

“Oh, goodness,” Claire sighed.

As she giggled before me, I remembered how she’d once thought so poorly of herself. But that was entirely behind her now. In fact, the young lady sitting in front of me reminded me of the very man who had feelings for her, Prince Vik.

I wanted to stay with her forever; I was sure of it. Even ignoring my gratitude for her saving me with her spell, I loved how warm it felt to be recognized as a fellow person.

My heart filled with happiness. Come to think of it, these pastries reminded

me of Claire. They were just as sweet.



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Formerly, the Fallen Daughter of the Duke: Volume 2

by Ichibu Saki

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